

Let Me See Your Face

When Lorimer, the managing director of the advertising agency known as IAS, calls a conference on a particularly important new assignment from the War Office, some of his staff find that more than their technical ability is involved. Lorimer himself is a war shellshock case; Monk, the copywriter, is a former conscientious objector. And for the research executive, Jimmy James, in love with Jessie Garland, but married to Sarah who is domineering and politically minded, the new account means both a crisis of conscience and the climax of his love affair. For all of them, as this story shows, any dividing line between their private and business lives is largely imaginary.

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Let Me See Your Face



HEINEMANN

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Our intelligence being only conducted by way of the Word, whoso falsifieth the same betrayeth public society. It is the only instrument by means whereof our wills and thoughts are communicated: it is the interpreter of our souls. If that fail us, we hold ourselves no longer; we inter-know one another no longer. If it deceive us, it breaketh all our commerce and dissolveth all bonds of our public policy.

—MONTAIGNE

CHAPTER ONE

It was a narrow, distinguished-looking house in a Bloomsbury square, with the usual bony plane-tree outside, and a dash of green grass under the windows. The small, tactful, brass plate said 'IAS', and you might have taken it for the legation of one of the minor European powers, except that in even smaller engraving underneath were the words, 'Incorporated Advertising Services'.

By the way the two men and the plump, pretty woman went up the steps and through the door, you could tell they worked there.

There was a little pantomime at the front door. The young man called David Neill attentively opened the door for Mrs. Garland—and John Cox, the older man, went through ahead of both of them. The two exchanged a friendly glance behind their Creative Director's back. What a great big self-centred lout he was!

John Cox had waited in the hall. He greeted their exchange of confidential smiles with a knowing look which was rather out of place.

"It's practically Christmas," he said. "You might as well come up and have a drink."

The other two felt stiff grins of grateful acceptance

settling hypocritically over their faces. They followed him upstairs.

A rather unpleasant but clever man called Bertram had founded IAS. Twelve months before, he had died suddenly of a heart attack, and Fred Lorimer, frustrated for years as Bertram's junior director, was now bringing in new business at an astounding rate. The offices were crowded to the eaves.

Factories have expensive machines and advertising agencies have expensive people. It pays to keep them happy, and Lorimer sincerely believed that after many uncomfortable years IAS was now a happy place to work in.

Taking their cue from him, the other directors tried against the grain to achieve a rather synthetic bonhomie. Cox in his office, as he poured grudging glassfuls of expense-account sherry for Neill and Mrs. Garland, was doing as best he could.

The door of his room burst open without a knock, and in came Lorimer himself. Short, bald and buoyant, he was followed by Cyril Monk, who wrote the copy for their more important accounts, like Pontifex Biscuits ('Pontifex Biscuits Satisfy'). Behind him came Jimmy James from Research, a thin, red-haired man with an unhappy face that now and then flickered into an unpredictable smile. Seeing Jessie Garland there with the sherry glass in her hand he smiled in just this way; but she was talking to David Neill and didn't look up. Jimmy James's face went back to being unhappy again.

"Celebrating Christmas already?"

Cox poured the boss a fuller glass, but not a really generous one.

Everyone in the room turned towards bald-headed Lorimer like obedient planets facing their central sun.

"So you're back at last. Just the people I want. John—it's the matter we discussed at lunch." (The directors resolutely used Christian names among themselves, though not often with subordinates.) "Shall you leave it to me?"

Cox pushed a plump, clean wrist out of a nice white cuff. Looking at his watch, he nodded glumly.

Then Monk the copywriter chimed in, nervously tactless as ever. "For that matter, I've a train to catch, too."

"I daresay you have," said Lorimer, quietly. He turned on his heel, and with his back towards them, gestured them forward with a flapping motion of his hands.

Monk was flummoxed. Lorimer, instead of arguing, had treated him like a child. Creative people at the beck and call of a bunch of mere business men—how insufferable!

Now he was being propelled forward by the others as they advanced to follow Lorimer. He had to go with the crowd and, what was worse, to endure from behind him the sound of Cox's sardonic chuckle.

They sat around on the edges of chairs in an awkward semi-circle, facing Lorimer's desk.

The Managing Director's room was quite the nicest in the building. A big eighteenth-century window, and through it glimpses of tree, roadway and grass.

The furniture all came from Heal's. As you could tell by noticing the contrast it made with Lorimer's ordinary snuff-coloured clothes and plebeian face, he hadn't chosen the furniture himself.

The somewhat incongruous still-life over the mantelpiece had been exhibited by one of the IAS artists at a West End gallery, and Lorimer had bought it because he made a point of being proud of his own people. They were good chaps, talented, and in every sense it paid to encourage them.

"This won't take a moment longer than is strictly necessary," said Lorimer in the second of his voices, the icy one.

Then, as usual, he launched into a long speech that sounded quite irrelevant.

"There's a distinct difference between advertising as it was before the war, and the business—or profession, if you like—with which most of us in this room are familiar."

David Neill, eyes half-closed in a face as self-absorbed as a dozing cat's, let the words drum meaninglessly into his ears. He was an artist, so no one really expected him to take part in arguments. The voices you heard at these meetings were all too bogus. No one spoke sincerely any more. He always did his best to sound utterly sincere: what a gimmick!

"Before the war our business was solely and wholly the selling of goods. And, indeed, since the war we are, as you know, still in the business of selling goods, and pretty successfully. But we are also selling ideas."

Lorimer stroked the place where his hair used to

be, and looked round with a frail little smile on his lips, as if only he himself saw the joke of what he was saying.

“Selling ideas. Ideas.”

He was going slowly now, emphasising every separated phrase.

“Using the devices—of modern publicity—to communicate more forcibly—ideas that are as old—as our very civilisation.”

‘No,’ Jimmy James thought. ‘No, I shan’t keep my eyes off Jessie any longer.’

He’d been staring at his knuckles, but now he looked up and with a furtive grin on his face glanced sideways across the half-circle of chairs. She was sitting with her body leant forward, her mouth partly open as if drinking in Lorimer’s words. She was an account executive, and so merely poised to pick up any practical decisions as they dropped. All this was probably over her head. A delicious fool. Neill, damn him, had been quick enough to sit beside her. Under dropped eyelids Neill was observing her, too. Didn’t she realise? Her rapt expression didn’t show it.

Only Monk was really attending closely to Lorimer. He was tense as a Japanese wrestler, alert for a chance to leap in with an effective remark. He was happiest when he could dominate all discussion. Unless he could assert his intellectual superiority, he plunged into pessimism and self-mistrust. But Lorimer was holding the floor so expertly that as yet there was no chance for others.

“Let me come to the point. Though we’re small as

yet at IAS, we're getting known as a coming agency. And today we've been paid a considerable compliment. We've been approached—no, Monk: let me come to my point. By the NOI—the National . . . Office . . . of Information”—with a special helpful glance at Jessie. “We're to prepare suggestions for tackling a very awkward problem indeed. A national problem, an important national problem. And before we go any further I want to make it clear that this whole matter is strictly confidential. I don't want it to go outside this room. I don't want it to be discussed yet, anywhere else, even inside the four walls of this agency. Is that quite understood?”

Even Neill wasn't trying any more to act sleepy and bored. Jimmy James turned his head from Jessie to look straight at Lorimer. Like the clever old stick he was, Lorimer had every one of them attentive—eating out of his hand.

“The people in this room at this moment, plus someone from Media and possibly one of my fellow directors, will act together as a small working party. You've been selected specially. And your job—our joint, collective job—is to prepare proposals. They are wanted in the New Year. By the War Office. Through the NOI. To improve recruiting. To the Regular Army.”

When he said ‘Regular Army’ there was just such a drop in his voice as if he had said ‘God’.

‘So Lorimer was one of those,’ thought Jimmy James. Just old enough for trench warfare. From a grammar school to a temporary gentleman's com-

mission, and thence to a gilded niche all one's own on the local granite war memorial. No one could tell with that generation. Mixed in with their bitterness was a queer touch of jingo. Hence Lorimer's genuflection towards the 'Regular Army'.

Jimmy James himself had been in the R.A.F., from A.C. Plonk to Wing Commander. Rags to riches; the big change. It was more than ten years ago, but it seemed only yesterday, and everything since, including even this job and the shambles his marriage was becoming, could in his opinion be put down to the war.

"A great deal of public money has been spent in this past year; much of it, I am afraid, to little avail. The recruiting figures, which I shall tell you a little later on, and in strictest confidence, bear so little relation to the expenditure on advertising that it would be accurate to term them deplorable."

'Lovely scraper-boards,' Neill reflected. 'Lovely young soldiers all gazing, with just the right touch of visionary alertness, into the middle distance. Nice big clean pictures of tanks that make them look like large hygienic children's toys. What was the point of all this talk? Get the right image, and you've got your advertising campaign.'

"Mrs. Garland is no doubt wondering what she is doing in this—um—*galère*." Lorimer said the French word meditatively as if he couldn't remember off-hand whether it meant 'galley' or 'gallery'. "Of course, it's partly because she's a remarkably efficient executive. . . ."

And so in fact she was, even though she might wear daft hats, and take the horoscopes in women's magazines seriously.

"... but a moment's reflection on your part should be enough to show that we shall above all things need the woman's point of view. The opinion is held at the NOI. And without wishing to pre-judge your discussion I think we shall eventually concur. That the pressure of wives and sweethearts, wives and sweethearts . . ." (As he repeated these words, was there something a little malicious in the way Lorimer looked around him?) "... is as responsible as any other factor for the serious shortfall in recruiting. You may have other notions. You may even disagree. Tomorrow or the day after the NOI brief will have arrived, and then you can get your teeth into it. Meanwhile, let us all remember. This is confidential. I've picked you specially."

He gave the gesture of dismissal. Monk darted from the room like a startled deer, in the desperate hope of catching his train.

"Oh, by the way, Neill . . ."

David Neill, alert behind his dropped eyelids, went back to the managing director's desk.

'Now or never,' thought Jimmy James. He turned to Jessie Garland and said softly, "Have a coffee?"

"I oughtn't. It's so late. What shall I do about the boy?"

"Can't the people downstairs look after him for a while?"

She blushed slightly, as if he had no right to know

about the people downstairs—indeed as if talking about the people downstairs was a shameless public admission which practically blackmailed her into agreeing.

Neill had finished his short private conversation with the boss. He eased himself cat-like past the pair of them in the doorway, but at the last moment turned to Jessie as if he had only just noticed her.

“Don’t forget,” he said, using a special voice, furry with intimacy, “tomorrow night.” He didn’t even glance at Jimmy James, but knowing Neill’s devious ways, Jimmy realised the remark was intended as much for himself as for her.

Not until they were upstairs in their usual corner of their favourite café, with a string trio grinding out knife-and-fork music that now included Christmas carols, was Jimmy James all set to ask, “What was Neill talking about—‘tomorrow night’?”

Guiltily she broke up her cream cake with her fork, and popped a small piece into her mouth. The tip of her tongue came out to lick a bit of cream adhering to her lip. He could watch her doing all that, he could watch her doing any trivial thing, with a strange absorbed pleasure. He almost longed for that little pink tip of tongue to reappear. Watching it was very nearly as good as a caress.

“Well—I’m not sure.”

“Tomorrow. Tomorrow night. With Neill. Come on—don’t make me grovel.”

"So I have to account for everything I do?"

"That's right."

"All these cream cakes. You're trying to ruin my figure."

"That's just the start. The next thing is to ruin your reputation."

She giggled foolishly, and his inside turned over with irrational longing.

"And now stop dodging. What about tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night?"

She lifted her chin so that the ghostly second chin under it didn't show, and moistened her lips with her tongue.

"He's taking me to the opera."

"Then why get so embarrassed?"

"He's nice-looking, too. Or don't you think so?"

"Quite a pretty boy. And single. In the market."

"You can't deny," she said soberly, "that it makes rather a difference."

"Have another cake. Waitress, another plate of cakes." Anything to pin her down opposite him for a few minutes longer. He thought wildly, 'Is this some woman's trick? Is she just doing it to make me jealous? Or is she really trying to shake me off?' She smiled at him, wryly, like a child caught in a mischief, and he found himself, almost against his will, smiling back and watching her.

She liked that—the sense of being sought after. She looked down complacently at herself, the white blouse frilly under the lapels of her dark costume

coat. Once she must have been admirably plump, just perfect. And in a few years she would have filled out too far. But now she was delicious. Her figure indeed was younger than her soft-skinned face, covered with tiny wrinkles that showed her age when she was tired.

In the tone neither of them used except in this silly half-hour when they drank coffee together, he said, "Baby-snatcher. He's only a child."

"I love you when you're jealous."

"You don't love me at all—that's the trouble."

"You'd be surprised."

They chose another cake each, and the waitress brought some more coffee. This time she had it black

He said, "Thinking of tonight. You know—Operation King's Shilling——"

Saying 'Operation so-and-so' was part of their private freemasonry. Her eyebrows went up in twin semi-circles of silent approval.

"I now know another reason why I like you. You're like the girls in the war. You met her on a train and got her a cup of tea between stops, or she was a driver and gave you a lift in her truck. I mean a perfectly nice girl, and all done so naturally. They weren't trying to grab your pay-book to see if you were a married man on the loose. Which in those days I wasn't."

"I know what you mean. But that's just a day-dream, my dear." In her smile there was a touch of malice.

"Not entirely. For once they weren't predatory, and I wasn't predatory. Life needed making brighter, and so we cuddled closer."

"Most of the men I knew were predatory."

"That's through being in the Wrens. Sailors are terribly predatory."

"Don't be unkind about sailors. There were some very nice sailors." And then, as if by repeating she made it true, she said, "That's just a daydream too. All the nice boys are dead, and all the nice girls are married."

"And what are we? A pair of ghosts?" As soon as the words were out, he wished he hadn't said them. He was the only person at IAS who knew the truth about her child. The father had been killed in the war but they weren't married, and she'd bought the wedding ring herself in a pawnshop.

She began to wipe her chin with the paper napkin, and to gather up her handbag and shake the crumbs off her lap.

"Come with you as far as the Tube?" For a moment he was afraid she might say no.

"You always do, don't you?"

She put her gloved hand in the crook of his arm, and he squeezed it slightly, holding it there. It was the nearest they ever got to any sort of caress.

Outside Holborn Tube Station she bought a paper, taking off her glove to handle the coppers.

He noticed the famous pawnshop wedding ring, and noticing his glance she realised what he was thinking.

The paper man was chanting, "'Orrible disaster!" in an unconvincing tone. Rush hour was slackening, but there were still plenty of briskly walking people to jostle blindly those who stood still. The two of them were standing in a little space of turbulent loneliness.

"Well," she said, "what's wrong with finding a father for the boy?"

"Is that all you're thinking about?"

"Not entirely," she said, honestly.

"I won't do, I suppose?"

"Jimmy," she said with a giggle, "are you proposing?" And then, as if checking some frivolous answer, she went straight on, "After all, what have we got? We get on rather well in the office. We have these silly half-hours drinking coffee. You say you love me, but we don't even hold hands."

"I *do* love you," he said, rather crossly.

"In a pig's car," she said, quickly taking his elbow to check him from stepping thoughtlessly into an advancing line of traffic unleashed by the lights. "Go and catch your bus."

As he moved away, unable to think, besotted by her, he heard her say, "Watch out for the traffic!" in much the same tone of voice that his mother had used once upon a time—but a long, long time ago, now.

This, he knew, was the last time they'd be able to go in the easy, pleasant old way, and chatter flirtatiously and eat cream buns. She was experimenting to see if he'd been saying what he meant.

Did he really mean all those things? How could

you tell? In the office they meant something, but once he jumped on his bus he was in a different world.

He jumped on the bus, hid behind his open evening paper, and tried to think seriously about his wife, Sarah. The way his feelings were rising up in him at that moment he couldn't even remember whether she wore her hair short or long these days.

CHAPTER TWO

Cyril Monk lived at Bromley, so he travelled from Victoria, which is the devil of a station to get to in a hurry from Bloomsbury.

He submitted to the chagrin of watching the tail-end of his usual train go out. Then he settled down to wait for the next one with a small bar of chocolate from a machine, and the copy of *The Times* which he had carried round all day with him and not yet had time to read.

He was a bony and very tall man with a big head and an intense manner. Something about him indicated a love of money—his good suit and his linen and his special dust-proof, water-proof, shock-proof wrist-watch on its wide leather strap. He had dark, rather hollow eyes, and hands that always looked tense, as if waiting to ward off a blow.

From start to finish this had been one of his bad days. And absurd though he knew it was, his tense feelings kept doubling the day's collection of gaffes until they were impossibly magnified and malignant. For weeks to come the trifling mistakes he'd made today would be lying in wait, ready to leap out of his memory and haunt him. Fancy telling Lorimer he had a train to catch—with such vital news in the offing! He must have been crazy! Yet how was he

to know it was something so important? Anyone could have made the same mistake. Lorimer himself had probably made much worse mistakes.

'Tomorrow,' he told himself as he always did at such moments, 'it will be so very different. The power will jet and spurt. New ideas—they'll come pouring out and astound them all. I shall be my usual self again.'

Indeed, the mere fact that old Lorimer had once more picked the Pontifex Biscuit bunch for this specially important job was itself encouraging. Jimmy James who had provided such a good background of intelligently-presented research. Neill, a good visualiser—an extremely good visualiser, providing of course the copywriter gave him the ideas. Mrs. Garland—Jessie—so much more efficient than she looked, and really rather sweet.

Yet when it came to rock bottom they were all—the whole lot of them—utterly dependent on his talent. Their entire business—their bloated expense accounts, their huge profits—depended on his command of words. He gave the thrust and they merely responded.

He folded his *Times* narrowly and pitched it with great aplomb first time into a wire litter-basket. Tomorrow he would really astound them.

In the train he got a corner seat—another private good mark.

The news from someone else's discarded evening paper bounced out from the front page and hit him. The pessimistic facts about recruiting that Lorimer

this afternoon had called hush-hush were now making headlines:

ARMY NEEDS MORE RECRUITS 'CRISIS' SAYS MINISTER

He read a couple of paragraphs, then tucked the evening edition away beside the thermos flask and the crumby papers from the vegetarian lunch. He didn't want to think about recruiting advertisements. It was too ugly, especially for a man of his principles. He'd switch his thoughts on again tomorrow in the train, and examine the problem with the clear, incisive brain of a man briskly on his way to work after a good breakfast.

But he couldn't get the idea of recruiting out of his mind. He was rather horrified to find that his mind was approaching it like any other advertising problem; any ordinary problem.

Recruiting. That of course was State policy. The fate of nations might depend upon it. Oh, it's Tommy this and Tommy that——

Thomas Atkins. Exactly: one needed to personify, to humanise. On the corner of an old envelope, in a hand that trembled as the train went over points, he wrote, 'Regimental History??? Esprit de Corps. *Personify* Modern Army (e.g. T. Atkins of Today).'

'A big head,' he thought. 'A beautiful scraper-board of a big head.'

Now, what did everyone want? What did Tommy

Atkins himself and his mother and his sweetheart want? (Never underestimate the power of a woman: old Lorimer knew the game, grant him that.)

Peace. A big head—and peace.

Peace: the word had come up into his mind unbidden. Once it had been a word with, for him, so many overtones. Peace in our time, O Lord. Peace on Earth, Goodwill to All Men. He had met Agnes at a Dick Sheppard meeting, and peace and love and youth were all mixed up in his mind. But the word had lost some of its gloss, now; it was mixed up with the right answers to give the tribunal to make sure of your exemption, and six years in a hospital, scrubbing floors. Occasionally they let him drive the ambulance, so when anyone asked him what he had done in the war, he always said, "I drove an ambulance."

There were other approaches. Tomorrow morning he would have to sort them all out. They were relying on him. It was his job.

Meanwhile he was getting farther away from London, and nearer to Bromley and Agnes. Like slowly and uncomfortably shedding a skin, the office mood of the lucid intellect with a formula for every problem gave way to the evening mood that was no different now from what it had been all through his boyhood. Looking for affectionate understanding, and getting it, in drenching, stifling abundance.

They had the upper floors of a house that had once been a vicarage. Round and about was a shrubbery,

and there was a gravel drive, run into ruts by the tradesmen's vans.

He made a loud, falsetto "Oo-oo!" as he went up the wide stairs, and from above came an answering "Oo-oo!"

Agnes was sitting as always, with hands folded, in a room impossibly neat and clean, with her hair glossy from the brush and her nose newly powdered.

Both bars of the electric fire were glowing domestically in the grate. Agnes firmly believed that a coal fire was wasteful and made dust, and a gas fire smelled and was almost certainly dangerous to health. Wanting to sit in front of actual flames was an absurd, outdated prejudice; the principal thing was that the room should be warmed. A little thermometer hanging on the upright of the door-frame confirmed that fact. Monk glanced at it as he came in. The temperature was 61°.

She got up and came towards him with reaching hands. As she kissed him he had a quick misgiving about the odour of sherry on his breath. Agnes was reasonably broad-minded, but she honestly didn't care for strong drink. Yet she didn't seem to notice this time.

When their meal—a winter salad—had got to the Ovaltine stage, he asked abruptly, "What would you say if I left IAS?"

Here and now, safe at home and seeing it all from a distance, he could play around with the idea of saying bluntly to old Lorimer, 'This recruiting campaign is vile. You can't expect me to dirty my hands with it.'

A moral stand always feels much more satisfying in imagination; in real life the issues are never quite clear cut.

She looked at him sympathetically. Something in his tone indicated that he didn't mean another and better job somewhere else. He was fed up, and ready to walk out.

"You must be run down. A nice break at Christmas will make all the difference."

There was no chance now of keeping quiet about the new campaign. She was noticing his hesitation. She put her face close to his, as if in the corners of the room there were invisible eavesdroppers.

"Hadn't you better share your trouble?"

Evasively he said, "I think you've hit it. I'm tired. I'm run down—completely."

Completely.

That of course was an advertising word, along with 'new' and 'now' and 'extra' and 'easy' and 'natural'. Tonight they felt like blisters on his tongue.

They say you never see an old copywriter. And indeed, for the rest of his life, or as long as he could stand it, the words he used every day would become more and more contaminated. 'More and more'. Like all the simple and sincere phrases, that too was advertising: 'More and more people are using Globbo'. But 'contaminated' wasn't, and never would be. The disagreeable words were taboo in advertising. Ugliness, death, corruption, decay, worthless, muck, disgust. They still had some meaning left. Death, he thought, looking around him. Corruption. Decay.



The clean shining room, as it stared back, seemed to be mocking him.

"To think of giving up such a good job! Isn't there something more serious? Seriously, now."

Serious for her meant sexual. She had been to his office once or twice, and seen how full it was of painted young things. As for the woman they employed as a receptionist, judging by her private conversation on the telephone she was little better than a strumpet.

So quietly that it sounded dramatic, he said, "The thought of going to the office tomorrow quite fills me with dread."

Now she was beginning to drag his moral dilemma inch by inch out of its hiding place. She must encourage him, give him sympathy. But she had to make sure he wasn't running away from some intrigue. Some shameless creature with a perm and a complexion out of a pot. Agnes herself had long straight black hair, almost long enough for her to sit on. During the day it was pinned up in a thick bun. When it was let down, one saw how remarkably thick and long it was, and Cyril would sometimes help her brush it.

"There's no point in trying to spare me extra worry. I'm your wife. It's a wife's place to share her husband's worries. And you're worried—I can sense it. There's nothing you can't tell me if you wish. Nothing I won't forgive."

So he began to explain, and as he told her, he sensed that she was losing interest. She understood

how to deal with his scruples. Dealing with another woman would have been more difficult.

She murmured an incantation that had worked once or twice before, when his conscience was bothering him. "Standing up for one's convictions takes so much more courage than being herded like sheep on to a battlefield."

Except for vague impressions left by a few war films she had scarcely any idea what a battlefield was like. There would be two groups of men in different uniforms, herded on to the battlefield by brutal sergeants with no respect for the individual. They charged each other again and again, until one side had used up all its ammunition and there was a big heap of dead and dying. In the future of course it would be atom bombs: immense explosions followed by people for miles around dropping like flies sprayed with Flit. Utterly horrible.

The gleam in her eye and her gesturing finger showed she had got there, finally. "You had a conscientious objection to killing, and the Government respected it. They well might not have done. They might have put you in jail and forcibly fed you. That's to their credit, and for that you must surely respect *them*. Now, years after, the Government wants you to write some advertisements. What's the connection? You won't be killing anybody. And wasn't it *killing* you objected to?"

"I'll be encouraging young men to go out and fight. That's tantamount to killing."

"Tantamount! When you start using words like

'tantamount' I know you haven't got a leg to stand on."

She went into the bedroom, leaving him to his thoughts. He heard the first few pins rattle on the glass-topped, kidney-shaped dressing-table he'd bought her once because she'd seen it in the window of a West End shop and talked of nothing else for a week. When she came back her hair was slipping out of its buns and the brush was in her hand.

"Hold your hand out," she said with mock severity, as if intending to hit him with the brush, but instead she put hairpins into his palm one by one.

The silent tension between them made his body stiffen unbearably. It was as if they had quarrelled without any words being spoken; like wrestling in the dark with an enemy you couldn't see.

"Be a dear. Put those pins in the lacquered box on my dressing-table."

When he came back her head was dropped between her knees, and the long hair fell like a thick veil. She was brushing it with determined downward strokes. From inside the veil a dulcet voice said, "Don't imagine I don't sympathise. I do. You must do whatever you think is right. But first you must be sure—absolutely sure."

"I could get a job in another agency."

"But you mustn't neglect your career. Do you want to go back to scrubbing floors?"

It wasn't logical but it was effective. Agnes had one big advantage over everybody else, even his parents. For she'd been with him right at the start.

The Dick Sheppard meetings and the big PPU demonstrations; and when he'd gone into the hospital to escape the contamination of war, she'd stuck by him. Even though it meant breaking with her family, who under a religious veneer had turned out to be astonishingly military-minded.

He could hardly visualise the man he had been then—living in a strange dream, which Agnes and no one else had shared. One year they'd been childhood sweethearts; the next they were grown up and alone together. They got married early in the war. Near the hospital they found a little two-roomed labourer's cottage, stone built. It was quite marvellous—a sanctuary. When the Government began calling up women as well as men she started a baby, as so many other women did, but this one went wrong.

When she came out of the nursing home after all the pain and misery, everything had become different. The cottage was cramped and inconvenient, and he was openly bitter about getting up in winter at the crack of dawn to go and scrub floors. She soon found out why; it was one of the nurses.

From then on she knew she would have to hold on to him by every means in her power. She must live his life for him, share all his worries, but never let him take a decision on his own account. He liked money and comfort and sympathy; all those things must be used to bind him to her.

"Brush the hair at the back," she said. "Briskly. Right up from the roots. It does so much good."

He brushed—one, two, three, four, five, six. Each

stroke started right down at the roots, hard against her scalp. He brushed so harshly she wondered how she would ever be able to stand it a single time more. But she didn't say a word, just tensed her muscles to endure. And—*there*—he wasn't doing it any more. She had mastered him without a protest: six, seven, eight, nine, ten, more gently and reasonably at last, though now her scalp ached so much that the lightest touch was painful.

"That's splendid. Magnificent." She took the brush from him. "Your library book is on the little table."

And if he didn't want to read his book? Then she'd look through her carefully-marked copy of the *Radio Times*, and suggest a programme that might interest him. And if there was nothing he liked on the radio he could have a nice hot bath—that always soothed his nerves. Then when he was properly relaxed they'd go to bed early.

He picked up the book and looked at it. "I think I'll have a hot bath."

"I've got some new bath-salts," she said. "You'll like them."

CHAPTER THREE

All the way to Putney, Jimmy James sat on the bus trying to forget about Jessie. This seemed one night when the artificial, invisible wall between the office and home might be in danger of breaking down. The words he had spoken week after week to Jessie—learning to mean what he said as he went along—were beginning to have consequences.

When he arrived home, the glow of their conversation was gone, and he felt empty. His front door was locked and the lights were out.

He looked from the dark corridor into the sitting-room. The curtains hadn't been drawn. The cold, airless room smelt of dead cigarette smoke. The grate was black and full of yesterday's ash and clinker, and there were stub-ends in all the ash-trays. From the disposition of the chairs, Sarah had been having a committee meeting.

He went across to open a window and let out some stale smoke. A sharp draught made the ash stir and blow from the ash-trays. With the gesture of a man who has failed in an experiment, he let the window swing closed again.

Beastly, box-like brick houses, twelve to an acre and mortgaged to the eaves. Ugly and stupid, and England was covered with them.

He went into the kitchen.

Stuck on one of the dresser hooks was Sarah's usual note, written on the back of an old envelope like a message to the milkman:

"Emergency! Had to go out and do something about German Rearmament. There are some sausages."

He found the sausages. They were uncooked and clammy-looking, so he put them back in their paper and poured out a bowl of cornflakes.

He ate the cornflakes, standing by the kitchen table. Then he went into the front room to clear out the hearth and get a fire going. His brief-case was where he had flung it—lopsided on a chair. When the fire was crackling brightly, he got out some figures which could perfectly well have been left to next day. Desultorily he started to work at them with a slide rule and a nice white sheet of paper.

After a while the fire began to go well, and he felt less at odds with himself. He screwed up his paper and threw it in the fire, and went to look for a book.

He liked good thrillers and books about parts of the war he could visualise himself experiencing, like escaping from German prison camps. Every now and again, from a sense of duty, he began to read a new book on statistics or economics, but often didn't get more than half-way through.

After his six years in the R.A.F., he'd read for a B.Sc. (Econ) because you didn't need Latin, and sociology was the appropriate subject for someone curious about the world he lived in. It was only later

he learned that there aren't many jobs for sociologists.

Practically everyone at college in his time was an ex-serviceman, each more or less speciously claiming Government grants on account of education interrupted by the war. It was like a continuation of service life, with exams instead of ops, and no uniforms, and much more politics because for the first time one was fairly free to be political.

Politics was Sarah's half of the bookshelf, starting with the Left Book Club, which she must have read as a schoolgirl, and ending with imported Russian novels, long, priggish and dull, in extravagantly ornate bindings.

It was no use looking for a thriller he hadn't read before. Sarah read his thrillers, rather furtively, but never bought any of her own.

There was a whole row of her school prizes. What a clever schoolgirl she must have been! Indeed, everyone at college expected her to get a first, but she didn't work. Instead it was all politics, terribly exciting at first but rather boring in the long run.

It had been the Indian summer of left-wing student politics. All the men who had formed their opinions at the tail-end of the thirties come back to the classrooms with a six-year war behind them.

Even Jimmy had been political because he liked the sense of importance it gave him. Besides, politics helped him mentally to put in their right place his lecturers and professors, with their timid views and bitter jealousies. What had they got, worth the attention of a man who had commanded a bombing squad-

ron—except the vital piece of paper that guaranteed a job?

Politics, too, was the way to Sarah. She wasn't the best-looking of them, but she was the most vital. She fascinated him. A woman, as it had then seemed, devoid of all the irritating attributes of womanhood—the coquettishness and possessiveness. She'd been brought up in a wildly emancipated upper-class family, where the children were sent to progressive schools and left to do exactly what they wanted. In any underground resistance movement, no man could wish for a better comrade beside him. But yesterday's glory had faded. So far from being an underground resistance movement, life in fact was composed of mortgages and ash-trays and uncooked sausages. Was she going to live like a feckless student for the rest of her life?

She was coming in now, slamming the front door so hard that one day the panes of coloured glass in the fanlight would unquestionably smash.

"You've lit a fire—how nice."

It would be a lie to say he didn't have a twinge of affection for her just then. Her eyes shone with the exciting aftermath of her meeting, and across her forehead fell a lock of chronically untidy hair.

Pregnancy seemed to be agreeing with her.

She sat down by the fire and warmed her red hands. She had gone out without gloves or a hat.

"Bloody cold tonight."

"Yes, we can certainly do with a fire."

"God, I'm hungry."

'What,' he pondered irritably, 'am I supposed to do about that? Cook her supper?'

"Let's fry that pound of sausages and wolf the lot," she said, suddenly turning to smile at him.

She had noticed the empty, rather squalid cornflake bowl on the sideboard. She was going to the kitchen now, full of vigour, getting to grips with the frying-pan. She wasn't so bad. She couldn't help being the way she was made.

"You keep me company—make some chips."

Everything would be fried, and almost certainly give him indigestion. Not as if she hadn't been told. One day he'd actually said so, although he knew she treated any sign of physical weakness as mere male petulance.

'Why are you stirring yourself up like this,' he wondered. 'Asking for a row. What good will it do? Why not wear the mask you always wear at home?' It was only the last few days he had begun to realise it was a mask.

In the kitchen she licked the corner of her handkerchief, and advanced on his face.

"Who's been feeding you cream cakes?"

He tried to swivel his face away from the damp handkerchief, but she caught his ear between thumb forefinger.

"For God's sake—I'm not a child."

"That's all *you* think."

She rubbed for a bit, then said thoughtfully, "But you don't like cream cakes."

"This client does."

"A lady client?"

"Yes—that's right."

"I've never quite grasped what you do for a living. But you certainly have a high old time."

She started pricking holes in sausages with great determination.

Wasn't it time she learned exactly where the money came from?

"It's not all fun. We started today on a job you'd hate. A campaign to recruit more men into the Army."

"I thought the Government did all that?"

"Maybe the Government haven't been making such a good job of it. Anyway, they've come to us."

"Can't you get out of it?"

"Someone's got to do it. Why not me?"

"Aren't there certain principles involved?"

"All right—let's quarrel about abstract principles. It'll make such a nice change from forgetting to pay the telephone bill."

She had no subtlety or self-restraint. If you asked her for a row, you got it, straight between the eyes. "You know it's wrong. Why do it? Why crawl to them? Why demean yourself?"

"You mean you want me to resign?"

"If necessary."

"But they'd think I was crazy. Someone else would do it. And jobs in research don't grow on trees."

The first spontaneous reaction was over; now she was thinking about the problem carefully. That was the awful thing about marriage, it was all too boringly predictable.

"I don't necessarily want you to resign. When it comes to the point, if it has to be done, I don't even mind you doing it, if you have to do it. Providing you only realise in your own mind how wicked and corrupt it is."

She sounded rather fond of him and concerned for him. How dare she!

"What about the Red Army and the Chinese Army? Full of conscripts, yes?"

"But they don't tell them lies about the glories of war. At least, I don't think so."

She hated him making critical remarks about Communist governments. The big filthy papers did it every day—that didn't matter. But he did it, not for politics—he'd lost interest in politics—but to force her into a corner. She watched his face now as it turned sad. He was ashamed of having said that. It was because he had this redeeming streak of honesty that she felt tender towards him. He lived in a muddle, emotional as well as intellectual, but he was more of a human being than the men who knew all the answers.

When he spoke again, it was in a more reasonable voice. "How can you explain to youngsters about war? They wouldn't believe it. They wouldn't understand it, either. It's far too complicated."

"The truth about war is surely that we want to abolish it."

"For you everything's so bloody simple." She knew that her remark would irritate him. But it was true: why brood on war? Abolish it.

Though she had in fact read history, she was more like a woman doctor, fresh-faced and candidly man-to-man, yet somehow, Jimmy reflected, unreliable. Even when on paper they are highly qualified, men can never bring themselves to trust such women completely. They're efficient-looking but they're a menace because they so often miss the point.

The hot fat spluttered as she tipped in the sausages. One she had forgotten to prick because of the argument began to split open slowly from end to end.

He wanted to take her arm and move her around to face him, but she was busy with the pan. Ever since starting the baby, she had retreated into her own body as into a citadel. She let him hold her and kiss her, and even responded as she had always done, but he had no power over her now. He couldn't any longer make her see the light and forget her abstract arguments by taking her in his arms.

In a different, more sober tone of voice, thinking how little they had in common nowadays, he said, "We can't go on like this".

"Chuck up your job if you want to. We'll manage somehow."

He felt a momentary glow of pleasure at that. She was like a man. Too proud to be a burden.

"But seriously," he said, "how can I? There's the baby. You don't seem to consider the baby in all these arguments."

She started to gesticulate with the fork as she answered. "On the contrary, I do consider the baby. I practically think about nothing else but the baby. I

was sick all the morning. I know it's only three months gone and they say you're not supposed to be nowadays—but I was sick. Don't you think I could have rung up the women's group and put them off, and got my feet up and listened to 'Mrs. Dale's Diary'?"

"Why didn't you then?" he said, rather bitterly.

"What sort of mother do you want for this child?" she asked fiercely.

Until now they'd been arguing like two people throwing verbal objects at each other, as they might have thrown dinner plates. But when she said this, for the first time their conversation became communication. What sort of mother did he want for his child?

He couldn't yet envisage their unborn child as a separate person with a distinct personality. It would surely be like him. It would be himself as a child—his own childhood over again. A tough childhood, he told himself, lacking tenderness, fought out on the romantic frontier between the respectable working class with polished brass knockers and the unrespectable working class who ate their meals off newspapers. Winning fisticuff bouts and then going on to win scholarships.

"I suppose, someone like my own mother," he said at last, with a crooked smile as of someone who has caught himself out in a fallacy. She remembered his mother as a clean, restrained, industrious woman who made terribly strong tea and was always busy with necessary needlework.

"I don't quite see." 'Even though I'm different and

detest needlework and prefer coffee,' she reflected. 'there's surely no reason why I shouldn't bring up a child just as well as she did. Maybe less indulgently, so that he grows up to think of women as something more than just creatures invented to wait on him.'

She was assuming—and indeed had assumed all along—that the baby would be a boy.

"I mean tender and warm and feminine," he said aggressively, as if each word was a challenge to her. "Surrounding the child with love. Making him feel secure."

"So now I shan't love my own child?"

"In your own way, yes, I dare say." Thinking she might have said, 'our child'.

"Love is more than giving him too many lollipops. Love means making a world fit for children to live in."

"Children? Didn't it used to be heroes?" Politics again; but then, he daren't let her have the last word.

"Turn up the light under the chips," she said, "the sausages are cooked already."

Blue smoke came out of the chip pan. "Shall I drain them on to some newspaper?"

"I suppose so."

Later on they sat facing each other across the kitchen table. They handed each other salt and sauce without a word. She poured the tea. As usual, she hadn't made it strong enough.

After this silence had gone on until it was almost unbearable, he asked a question.

"Good meeting?"

"Very sensible and businesslike."

"What have you decided?"

"We're going to have a mass poster parade down the High Street on New Year's Eve."

Mass, he reflected. That means a couple of dozen, if they're lucky.

"We're going to have bagpipes," she added.

"Oh my God!"

"You ought to come too," she said. "A Wing Commander. Making sure we all keep in step."

"Wearing my medals, I suppose," he said sarcastically.

"Wearing your medals," she said, with a twinkle in her eye. His medals were a joke between them. On their first day out together as students he had kept her in fits of laughter, describing an investiture. He never fell for humbug—unlike many who called themselves Communists and yet were easily taken in by their own humbug.

He thought, 'If only she were rabid and hide-bound, like the papers make out they are. A few of them are; she isn't. If she were rabid and unbearable no one would blame him for throwing her over. But she had a sense of humour. She had her own odd sort of integrity.'

What was he complaining of? That she didn't keep the house spick and span? What a prig that made him sound.

It was something much deeper. Something that involved his desire for mastery over her, and her power

of mastery over him. So he was driven to defend himself by any means. Even by mocking her belief that German rearmament could still be stopped by marching two dozen somewhat apprehensive people and a bagpiper through a shopping centre on a Saturday afternoon.

She thought, 'He's different tonight. Or am I different—is the baby changing me, and so seeming to change the world around?' Then she wished she hadn't fried the chips; they were beginning to make her feel sick all over again.

Next day at IAS was roughly the same as every other day. Jimmy James spent it composing a cunning questionnaire to be sent to five hundred stockists of Botany wool underwear. Lorimer's diary had an entry almost every half-hour—everything from a typographer with a grievance to a date at his club to play chess with a man he rather disliked who might one day be able to steer a cosmetic account into the agency. John Cox, the Creative Director, spent the day at a dirty little fit-up studio where they were shooting a television commercial short for the agency. It made a nice change from deskwork.

Jessie Garland bustled and charmed her way through it all, slowly dominating the flux of papers and dates and telephone calls that flooded around her. She had it slightly easier than the other account executives, because her warm nature brought out the best in other people; they tended to be more cheerful and easy-

going. But the work took it out of her. She wasn't really the dominating type, and never would be.

From the outside looking in, advertising agencies are quite large and solid-looking businesses. They give lots of people a living, and they even have canteens and sports clubs and pension funds. Advertising is a business, as everyone knows, where there's a lot of money floating about: it drifts by and you must be quick to grab it.

It comes mainly from commissions paid by newspapers and magazines to agencies who buy advertising space with their clients' money. Today or tomorrow the client may decide to take away his money—say his fifty thousand pounds—and give it to someone else to handle. And away is snatched too, the six or seven thousand pounds which yesterday had been one's commission.

An imprudent word, a bit of inefficiency, a bribe, an intrigue, a clash of personalities—and thousands of pounds may be snatched from your hand. To keep up an appearance of solidity and competence in this insecure and nerve-racking milieu you've got to be good.

The big man must know how to ring the changes. Inside the agency he must be a good organiser, unremitting about good work punctually delivered, yet tactful because these creative people fly off the handle at the most trivial thing. Inside the agency the big man counts for something. Doesn't he pay these people their wages? But when he steps outside the door he's small fry once more. Business men may be

civil enough to treat him as an equal, but secretly in their hearts they regard him as a tout. A smooth-talking magician who started by offering them an advantage over competitors if they would be the first to advertise 'scientifically', and then compelled them to spend larger and larger sums every year for fear of falling behind. Because of course the tout or someone like him had gone to their competitors too, and made the same magical offer.

Inside the agency the big man has a reasonable amount of business man's power; but once outside he's as lonely and self-dependent and potentially helpless as a spy.

While giving an impression of calm confidence, he must be watchful all the time for the opinionated advertising manager, the director with a bee in his bonnet, the man or the situation that can suddenly snatch away the lovely lolly. It's a treacherous world, with a top dressing of geniality, but underneath there's little love lost anywhere. At the very moment when he is buying you a drink, the man with the friendly smile may be contemplating throwing you over. The account may have been with you for twenty satisfactory years, but that's no guarantee. To your face they may swear they're as pleased as Punch, and yet be negotiating behind your back.

In this environment Jessie worked not too badly, because she was efficient in practical matters and people liked her. Now and then she was shocked when something rather outrageous happened, but she always put it down to the individual badness of

the person concerned. She did her present job well enough, but she'd never get to the top, because she wasn't forceful enough.

Lorimer slightly lacked polish and social aplomb, but in other respects he was more the type for the top flight—long-headed, experienced, subtle, and just a little bit histrionic. And he was welcome to it.

Neill pushed his head round the door of her office. Artists were rather less often to be seen on her landing than copywriters, who flitted to and fro with pieces of paper in their anxious hands like raw recruits in barracks with the sergeant's eye on them.

She prudently put up a hand to shut the hatch in the wall through which she had been dictating letters to her secretary in the cubby-hole next door.

"Hear my new slogan?" By his manner she could tell he meant for Army Recruiting. Already among the four of them it was like a little conspiracy within the agency.

"Yes?"

His last one had been: 'BRIGHTNESS ALONE IS NO LONGER ENOUGH—IAS ADDS *TRITENESS* TO BRIGHTNESS'. Even old Lorimer had laughed at that one.

'YOUR CHANCES OF BEING DISEMBOWELLED ARE SLIGHTER THAN YOU THINK.'

There was a pause.

"Not funny?"

"Not cold sober. You should try it on someone after a couple of gins."

"Talking of gins: what time shall I pick you up tonight?"

"Quarter past seven ought to be soon enough."

"Why not make it quarter to? Have that couple of gins you were brooding about? You can't take *Don Giovanni* cold sober."

"My dear—just think. I've got to bath the boy and bed him and tell him a fairy story."

"How about afterwards?"

"Perhaps afterwards. The people downstairs go to bed at ten o'clock, so I've got my sister to come. She'll be staying the night. So it doesn't matter if we are a little late." Then, as if assuming he would take unfair advantage of any small concession, "Within reason, I mean."

"Seen old Lorimer this morning?"

"No, I haven't."

"I met him in the corridor. He looked pretty rough. Bloodshot eyes. When I told him my slogan he didn't even smile."

"Perhaps he didn't think it was funny. There must be quite a few people who don't think disembowelling's a joke."

"The whole thing's a joke. You know what they say: even advertising can't sell a bad product. And in this country every adult male gets a sample of this product. It's called conscription."

"You too, I suppose."

"British Army of the Rhine. The lovely *fräuleins*.

Of course, the better rackets were killed stone dead by the time I arrived. No Leicas, no binoculars. But lots of lovely fraternisation."

"No disembowelling?"

"One or two perfectly ferocious football matches. I used to play in goal."

'That was just it,' she reflected. 'Leaning against the upright in a nice warm jersey, waiting indolently for his *prima donna* moment.'

"Ta ta!"

About four o'clock, Lorimer's formidable secretary came in to borrow some aspirins.

"Headache, dear?"

"I never get them. It's Mr. L. I tell him he's got 'flu but no—managing directors can't afford to have 'flu. He's so frightfully obstinate."

"Aren't they all."

'Flu might mean he'd retire for a few days to his house down in Surrey, and leave someone else, probably Cox, to fill the bill on Army Recruiting. How disagreeable!

Nobody respected Cox particularly. The creative boys said he hadn't enough talent and the executives said he hadn't enough administrative ability. But he had plenty of 'experience'—in other words, a good memory for the clichés of the business, and a knack of ending up top dog after a dog fight. And he had an amazingly wide circle of acquaintances, a few of whom from time to time brought business into the firm. He had the knack of getting to know people in bars, and then treating them after the second round

as if they were friends of a lifetime. He was a valuable man to have around.

She got the mail off and cleared her desk of everything outstanding; took the 'phones off their cradles so she wouldn't be interrupted, then propped a little mirror against the big glass ash-tray and carefully made up her face. In the bright little mirror the lines didn't show much. She seemed to be looking at her face years ago, before she had the child.

That's the way it is. A child grows by sucking your vitality. Not just the dressing and undressing, the washing and chiding and consoling. Day after day your strength sucked away as if from a wound by a young monster dizzy with energy to whom every new sensation is fresh and overwhelming.

Jessie often tried to persuade herself that in her little boy she could see the father. When Tony did anything particularly good or charming, he was taking after his father. When he did anything cruel or absurd or destructive that was inexplicable. The fact was, Jessie had quite forgotten the child's father. He'd been an Air Force officer in Air Force uniform with Air Force mannerisms. But the personality of the man himself—Jessie couldn't now remember at all distinctly, except that he was tall. That was not to say they hadn't been in love. They had been. Crazily in love, and it had been all the more intense and heart-breaking because he was still flying. He had eight more operations to complete his second

tour, making sixty operational flights in all, and then he would be grounded. Anything he said that hurt her could be put down to the strain of flying.

But now the actual imprint made there by the man himself had worn away from Jessie's memory. He had been an R.A.F. officer, and all the books and films and sentiment about the men of the Air Force just helped her in the process of giving Tony an imaginary father he could look up to with respect.

Her sister had already made Tony's tea. She was waiting until Jessie arrived before getting the boy to undress himself for his bath.

"Mummy, Mummy."

"Yes, darling."

He bounced away from his aunt's knee; she looked a little aggrieved, as if it was a sign that up to now he'd been trifling with her affections.

He flung his thin cold arms round Jessie's neck. She picked him up and kissed him. His slipping arm knocked her hat sideways, so that it was only held by its pin.

He let go and backed away, not certain whether he'd done something wrong in knocking her hat crooked. He felt too the coldness from his aunt.

"I got eight out of ten for sums."

"That was clever of you."

She pulled out the pin with one hand, and put the hat on the sideboard with the other.

"Nice tea?"

"Oh yes. We had tinned crab."

"Oh Delia—you shouldn't have." Her sister didn't know whether the protest was because tinned crab cost money, or was indigestible.

"Where are you going tonight, Mummy?"

Jessie always played fair with him, told him what was happening on her evenings away, so that he would grow up to trust her.

"It's like a theatre. You remember the theatre—'Babes in the Wood'? Only even bigger. They sing all the time. It's called opera."

"Like pantomime."

"Like pantomime only serious."

"You mean no funny man with a red nose and bags of flour? Oh, Mummy—don't you remember?"

He laughed long and loud and falsely, rather like an actor.

"Can't I come too?" The laugh had been to soften her up for that question.

"It's late at night and it isn't Christmas. Or birthday, either."

"Someone else is going to take you with them?"

"Yes. And I may be very late indeed." She caught Delia's eye, as much as to say, 'I've told you. I've been frank about it.'

"Oh, Mummy. Couldn't I dress up and take you myself?"

"Dress up?"

"Like they do on the films. Like waiters."

"Later. When you're older."

"When I'm in long trousers?"

"About then."

As they talked he was taking his clothes off ready for bed, and she too was wandering about the flat, undressing as she went, taking off her skirt and putting it in a press, going to the wardrobe for her long, glittering frock and hanging it over the back of a chair.

Naked and rather pathetically like a skinned rabbit, he pretended to shiver with the cold. On impulse she turned and put her warm soft arms round him and hugged him to her shiny, flimsy petticoat with the flesh deep and soft underneath. He grinned slyly to himself, as if he had achieved something by a trick.

"Now into the bathroom, and no playing with the taps. And no splashing, either," said Delia sharply.

Jessie reflected, 'She sounds like the child's harassed mother and I'm behaving like the flighty young gadabout.'

He darted off, hooting mockingly, as much as to say, 'I've not made any promise about splashing'.

Delia closed the door after him with a sigh of fatigue.

She loitered across to Jessie's dress and lifted it partly off the chair to look at the full skirt appraisingly.

"Is he nice?"

"Who?"

"I mean this man."

"Nice? Yes. Nice-looking. He's quite young, and very brilliant. Like a clever pussy-cat."

"Not married, I hope?"

"Oh Delia, what do you take me for?"

There was a long sisterly pause, during which each

tried to read the other's thoughts. Finally Jessie said gently:

"Come on. Get it over with."

"It's nothing much. Not what you think. I was watching you with the boy. You're only home for five minutes of his day, but in no time he's yours, heart and soul. And you've always been like that."

"Have I?"

"And then there's your job. Not that anything isn't better than teaching." Delia paused. "And all the men chasing you."

"Oh. Them." She picked up the dress. "Be a dear. Lift it over my head."

Crouched at the mirror, she was restoring curls with a tail-comb when Delia said:

"And you'll be late?"

"Very late."

"Give me a ring. I mean: do try to get back for breakfast. It's so awkward with the boy."

"That only happened once. And it wasn't entirely my fault, was it?"

Delia was grinning. Beneath the schoolmistress was the schoolgirl, helping the head girl break out of the dormitory. "Not entirely. It takes two." Jessie giggled, and reached out her arms to hug her sister close. Delia enjoyed her bad sister's wickedness, revelled in it as some sort of compensation.

From the door came a quick, imperative ring.

"Mummy! It's him!" came a high voice from the boy's bedroom.

"Go to sleep."

She was putting a short imitation fur coat over her dress. It was made of nylon and washed an improbable gleaming white like a soap-powder advertisement. "How do I look?"

"I still don't like that coat. It's what the tarts wear."

Delia was just being a torment.

"Come on, how do I look?"

Coldly, like a sister, Delia looked at her.

Not young any more. No one could say she looked young. Yet the men would still turn round and stare; and not just at her clothes. You could tog Jessie up in old sacks and the men would still run after her.

"You look lovely."

Jessie kissed her.

As she hastened to the door, Delia gave her some last words of sisterly advice. "Make sure he's the marrying kind." As a joke it didn't come off, because the bitterness had begun to show through.

She sat down on the arm of a chair, surrounded by Jessie's and Tony's scattered untidy clothes. She lit a cigarette, to get up energy to cope with the tidying. The kids in her class had been dreadful that day, and this was her first real moment of peace.

Down in the road, a sports car uttered a sudden spurting cough as it backed, turned, and went forward through the gears.

Jessie got her face tucked out of the cold so far into the collar of her coat that the blurred fronds

of white nylon tickled her cheeks and intruded into the edges of what she could see.

Lights flashed around and past; rolling shapes loomed up now and again and were nimbly avoided. Neill as he turned would move the wheel unusually far, so that the car swung around and rocked her towards him with exciting force. He was a good driver. A sports car with a pretty woman in the bucket seat beside him was obviously his element.

In Covent Garden he parked down a little cul-de-sac smelling of cabbages.

"We won't get lost in all these back streets?" She pushed the fur back from her face, and looked around.

"I know them like the back of my hand," he boasted.

He walked her under arcades and down alleys, and suddenly around a corner was the Opera House, gleaming there like a stranded monster rising out of the little commercial streets.

Large cars were coming out of the darkness and superbly dressed people getting out of them into the glittering light. The scene was like a glossy photograph from a very expensive magazine. But a photograph, efficiently posed, would have hidden so many little faults—the boil marks on the cropped necks of the rich men, the lines of strain, where the rich women lifted their jaw-bones rigorously to hide their sagging jowls. And their chauffeurs—like so many pimps in uniform.

It's never so good, Neill decided, as in a picture

you dream up in your own mind—the opulent paradise that a student in a provincial art school imagines London life to be. Once, indeed, it may well have been real. But who could believe in them now, living on expense accounts and pretending to run companies so huge that in fact they run themselves. They looked like type-cast bit players, not actual field-m Marshals or millionaires: they were really models with arrogant profiles and bristling moustaches, chosen with enormous care to advertise luxury products in the costlier papers.

“I’m glad we walked a bit,” she said. “Aren’t the dresses lovely?”

“Lovely,” he said. “Look, there’s a tiara.”

The music, though, was real. The overture came dancing at them, gave them a shake, sat them down with nerves receptive and eyes no longer looking at the audience around them.

“I love Mozart,” she turned to confide in him, “he’s so terribly, gay.”

He was watching the moving patterns of bright-coloured people on the stage, hunched down sleepily in his chair, applauding when everyone else applauded. Soon she had forgotten him. Like a child at a pantomime she had become part of the show, completely absorbed in the singing and the movement. She felt her senses heightened, felt all her yearning concentrated on the small bright oblong where the singers moved. Around her, like a great receptive

animal, the darkened Opera House breathed and applauded.

Then the house lights went up. It was the first interval. They didn't join in the rush for the bar, but stayed in their seats, looking rather askance at the people who thirstily pushed past them.

Then the music began again—gay, civilised. But her mind had oddly become separated and full of its own thoughts.

He's not married, is he? How had Delia guessed about Jimmy James? She tried, from various casual remarks, to visualise Jimmy's wife. Her father a surgeon, quite rich. She'd been sent to one of those silly advanced schools where there aren't any rules and they all use swear-words and learn about sex far too early. Apart from that, she was very clever and highly educated, and yet a Communist. Too busy with her own interests to look after him properly. For the past fortnight there had been a button missing from his waistcoat, and he often wore the same collar two days running.

He was clever, too, but ordinary. There was something inside him, worrying him, she could never tell what it was; but probably his marriage. Men thought it was the sad state of the world, when all they really wanted was comfort and understanding.

She glanced at David Neill sitting beside her. He looked half asleep, but you could never be sure with him. He was younger, handsomer, more uncomplicated than Jimmy; a nice boy, though she realised that they had practically nothing in common. More

than one night, and there would be a big, unbearable explosion of vanity. Whereas she only had to think of Jimmy, or look at him accidentally, and all her feelings flowed out towards him.

The second act was over surprisingly quickly.

"Like a drink?" asked David Neill.

"I'd love one," she said. After two or three drinks all else would fade away, and you'd have only yourself to contend with.

What she was doing was dreadful, but how else could you force Jimmy to say what he really thought and felt? He had kept saying those charming mad things over and over again, until finally they became true for her; she believed them; they were part of her life. Now he too must turn from words to deeds.

And his wife? She was a vague, cold, intellectual, careless creature without a face, who didn't deserve a husband like Jimmy if she didn't know how to keep him.

'I'm dreadful,' Jessie thought. 'How did I get like this?'

Then it was over, opera, applause, curtain calls. People were leaving quickly to catch their trains back to the suburbs.

"Come back to my flat for a drink?"

"Is it near?"

"Yes, very near."

He knew Covent Gardent so well because his flat was over a lock-up shop in one of those little alleyways that run east from St. Martin's Lane.

"I think it's marvellous," she said, 'peeling off a glove and looking round as earnestly as if she were thinking of taking over the lease. "So convenient—so central."

"The stairs take some getting used to."

It was two rooms and a ridiculously small kitchenette, high under the eaves.

The first room looked like a feature article in *House and Garden* about how a clever bachelor could work wonders in an old attic. He must have spent a lot of money, apart from the brains he put into it. But then, visualisers can always make plenty of money by free-lancing in their spare time.

It had even got the right sort of smell—leather and tweeds and gun-oil and old cigars. Maybe nowadays you can buy that smell in a bottle.

"The other room is half a bedroom and half a studio," he said. She expected something rather fluffy, like a boudoir, but instead it was quite stark.

A drawing-board, an angle-poise lamp, white walls and a divan covered with a drab folk-weave cover. In the corner he actually had a green metal filing-cabinet.

"Don't you find it cold?" she asked. Maybe you get fluffiness and cosiness in a man's bedroom only when a woman puts it there.

"I could have made it more elaborate," he said, "but I rather lost interest. So I made it functional. It suits me—I can work here."

They went back to the clever room with the masculine smell, and drank some gin.

He made his first assault in due form. Time went so fast that seeing the time on the clock was quite a surprise.

"I see you've got a phone," she said. "Do you mind if I use it?"

Delia was still up.

"Yes, the music was marvellous"—with a special glittering smile across the room to Neill. "Was Tony all right? Are *you* all right? Oh, you *are* all right. Well, I've had a marvellous time. Yes, I'm having a drink with a friend. Yes, dear—quite limp. What was that? Breakfast time? Well, it's terribly late, I know, but I've got my latch-key——"

He was close by now, speaking with his special soft voice into her ear. "You can stay the night if you like. On my spare divan."

"Oh, Delia, you *are* a beast. Literally. Yes, breakfast time. All right then."

She put down the telephone with a shrug, and looked at it for a moment. Then she felt his hand on her waist, because he didn't believe in wasting a second. Fending him off she said, "I really don't know why I said that. I must be crazy."

He grinned, somewhat disagreeably, like a man who knows all about women. "No, not now," she said.

It was like telling a big fierce pussy-cat to sheathe its claws. So it might; but only until the moment when you were least prepared. Then it would pounce.

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In the morning they had to get up terribly early, because she insisted on being taken home for breakfast. It was horrid going into the cold at such a barbarous hour, but then he found it quite exhilarating driving westward through the misty parks at a time when almost the only traffic was lorries and workers' double-deckers.

"I suppose you think I'm dreadful."

She had to say it twice before he understood what she was mumbling.

"You're sweet," he said. "Perfectly sweet."

How had it all happened? He couldn't quite remember. He had started flirting mildly with her, partly from habit, partly to give Jimmy James something to think about. And there she was; in his arms, in his bed.

With a dishonesty that sounded verbally so like frankness that it hurt, she said loudly, "I like you. I really do like you, David."

"That's nice."

"Once a long time ago I believed it was something you should save for people you really loved. But how can you tell?"

"Oh—love. I'd rather do it than talk about it."

"You were so very nice. So considerate. I didn't want it to be a fiasco."

'Oh God,' he thought. 'One of those talkative women who must go and pull it all to pieces.'

He pretended that the traffic had just then become exceedingly complicated and did things with the gears.

She tried again. "I don't want you to think I'm a bad woman——"

"Of course I don't."

"Or out husband-hunting or anything. . . ."

Somehow by the way she spoke he knew that she was telling a direct lie. In fact she was looking for a husband. But for some reason, some reason he would never understand, she had struck him off her list, assuming he had ever been on it.

When he got back to his flat, still with plenty of time for a leisurely breakfast, he sat down over scrambled eggs and a big cup of milky coffee and tried to decide what it was about him that had made her turn him down.

Not that he wanted to become anybody's husband. And she was no catch herself: nearly middle-aged, and saddled with a kid just old enough thoroughly to resent a new father. Even so, she had a nerve, turning him down quite so abruptly. He preferred being the one who did the throwing over. He'd been so sure he was fascinating her. He'd been considerate, too, as she'd admitted.

Maybe she had once been religious, and so was full of guilt and remorse. They were often the most interesting ones, once their resistance had been broken down and they exploded.

'Maybe,' he thought, 'she came with me in the first place because I remind her of someone else.'

You don't think I'm a bad woman. What an extraordinary thing to say. That generation—the ones in their thirties now—were a puzzle. Licentious

and yet romantic, as if expecting at any moment to be forcibly separated from the one they loved. They idealised people ridiculously. They took human relationships far too seriously.

Jessie herself had wondered for a moment if there was anything in him. But she couldn't see him sitting there at breakfast, *the third one, the man who mended things for Tony and took him to football matches.* He would never make a father, even if he tried. He wanted a woman all to himself. He wanted more than simple mothering, he wanted someone who would love him so much that he could be a bad son to her, and she would still forgive him. Yet because the only sort of love which could give him anything would also make demands on him that he wasn't equal to, he would end by marrying some decorative, empty-headed doll. He would be taken in by her, and she'd trap him and then make his life a misery.

Probably that was what had happened to Jimmy James. They'd never talked about his wife. She had a pact with herself to try not to think of him, but it got less easy as the days went by. Resolutely she sat at the breakfast table, devouring her food, and thinking exclusively of David Neill, inventing for him a future that would serve him right for not being the fatherly type. Though to do him justice, he'd never seemed likely to be. But it was awful to think that after only one night she wasn't left with a single illusion about him. Yet he wasn't so bad. Indeed, except for being a paragon of selfishness, he was actually rather nice.

"Don't eat so fast," said Delia, taking one plate away and putting another down on the cloth. "You'll be sick."

"Are you going to be sick, Mummy?" asked the boy, trying hard to break in on her thoughts. "I've been sick, twice. Once on a train. Do you remember, Mummy?" As if that established another bond between them.

"There's not much likelihood," said Delia, darkly. "In fact this morning you look better than I expected." And, of course, that was true. She looked marvellous and felt marvellous, as she invariably did. 'Perhaps,' thought Jessie, 'I'm that type—naturally promiscuous, someone who thrives on men.'

"I said, you look awfully well." Delia, at the long silence, was beginning to sound offended.

"I feel well, dear. Never better."

O God. It had only just entered her head that she'd have to face him again today. Would he be all-knowing and embarrassing? Would he go round making it obvious?

But he never came near her all morning. When they met in the afternoon at the great conference about the recruiting campaign, they might never have been more intimate than two people who meet by chance and perfunctorily shake hands.

CHAPTER FOUR

Anyone on the top deck of a bus, glancing casually through the Conference Room window at IAS, might have thought that something useful and serious was being decided there. The furniture was solid and expensive-looking; it might have been the board-room of a small but old-established shipping line. People with serious faces were sitting round a mahogany table with squares of clean blotting-paper in front of them.

Lorimer's 'flu—if indeed it was 'flu—hadn't broken yet, but his eyes still looked bloodshot and hollow.

He sensed that everyone had begun to freeze into formality, so he began with a hard-edged little joke.

"Let's assume you've all studied the brief. And later on no doubt the ghastly silences will betray those who actually haven't looked at it."

Pale grins came on people's faces like lights going on at dusk.

"Typical piece of Civil Service thinking," said Jimmy James. A tiny, pardonable bit of creeping—Lorimer had a notoriously poor opinion of Civil Servants.

Jessie chimed in, "Gives us so very little to go on."

Lorimer, now triggered off, started to deliver his customary little pattern of introductory sentences.

"That brief to my mind is a quite sterile document. It's inept. It's full of false conclusions. It lays down a sequence of preconceived ideas with little factual basis. And compels us willy-nilly to take them as groundwork for our advertising." He looked round fiercely, like a man who is trying to generate righteous indignation in himself and others.

Monk now was on the right wavelength. The sweet voice of reason.

"They've certainly fallen into a neat series of rather childish traps. With this brief in our hands we can clearly understand why the present advertising is so bad. I'd like to generalise a little, if I may."

Lorimer made an encouraging gesture and lit a cigarette, as if settling down to puff his way through a long but not uninteresting speech.

"The clue is in their emphasis on pay and conditions. I do feel this is quite erroneous. The theory seems to be that people join for money, that new recruits must be assured they'll be no worse off financially than they were as civilians. But in fact there's no comparison. They may have more spending money at any one time. But the whole way of life is so totally different that in other respects they may in fact be worse off——"

"Much worse off," muttered Jimmy James sardonically. "Maybe dead."

Lorimer looked up sharply, reprovingly, with a glance that (it seemed to Jimmy James) also had a particle of secret approval in it. After all, Monk had been a conchie, hadn't he?

Monk wasn't a bit put off. Breaking down that sort of resentment by sheer intellectual superiority was like a cold bath to him. One must plunge in, and after the shock comes the glow.

"The motivation is all wrong. Men join the Army for a complicated set of reasons, but they are mainly emotional reasons or, let us say, emotionally tinged."

"Emotionally tinged," muttered Neill, who had long realised that at these meetings by just echoing the key words intently one could create quite a good impression.

"Family reasons, pride, desire to prove courage, patriotism, romanticism, love of adventure—these, some of them or all of them—lie behind the decision of the regular recruit. You realise they are powerful emotions. And the present advertising is simply throwing them out of the window." He gestured towards the window.

Eyes round the table glanced involuntarily towards the window, and then back to Monk's face. He was hypnotising them all, as usual.

Lorimer smiled. This was what he liked to hear. Brilliant minds flashing and clashing, evolving advertising ideas that would prove memorable. Monk in his usual scintillating fashion had set the tone. But they must not forget the common touch.

"When I was a boy in the Midlands," said Lorimer, and at that moment a Midland accent bobbed up in his voice, said hello, and bobbed down again, "men as a rule joined the Army because they'd got their

girl into trouble. I dare say that's one instance of your powerful emotion."

The men all laughed. Jimmy James and Neill both looked at Jessie to see how she was taking this indelicacy. You would never forget her sex when she was in the room. She giggled. Her eyes were sparkling with gaiety. Evidently, reflected Jimmy, nothing said or done in this room had any connection with her private, secret life outside; she knew better than he did how to keep the two apart.

He found himself speaking. "Talking of motives. At one time, of course, unemployment was believed to be a motive."

"Ah, yes, James. And your usual impressive array of facts and figures, no doubt."

"The facts, certainly. But the interpretation is up to you. Because, as you'll see, it's rather baffling."

He paused. Cyril Monk, his mouth slightly open, his pale, bony face unwontedly animated, was waiting there, alert for the first fallacy.

"There was Mr. Lorimer's runaway Romco. Perhaps it's safe to regard him as the typical pre-1914 recruit. . . ." His voice seemed to be coming back to him from some echo-chamber. But their attentive looks assured him that the phrases that sprang up in his mind weren't actually nonsense. "Between the wars, you had the man who put on uniform to escape from unemployment. Those were the days, you remember, when recruiting posters—and very bad ones at that—were chiefly to be found outside Labour Exchanges. But nowadays we have full employment.

For the time being, anyway. There must be new motives for joining up—no doubt Monk will help to provide them.”

Monk’s face didn’t change at the touch of sarcasm. Jimmy, to his own surprise, was rather ashamed for making that crack. Monk’s motives were so different. It wasn’t just hypocrisy or effrontery. Inside, to Monk, it all made a sort of sense.

“Now we come to the facts. They’re not mentioned in your brief, but they’re extremely relevant. Only twice—between 1902 and 1954—have more than 50,000 men come forward as volunteers. That was towards the end of the Boer War, and towards the end of the Korean War. Both times of, what shall we call it—jingoism, eh, Monk?”

Monk nodded intently, as if he could get at the deep truth buried in these figures only by extreme concentration.

“Forty thousand recruits have been made six times—1904, 1908, 1920, 1922, 1935, 1953.” Pencils scribbled, glad to have something noncommittal and busy-looking to write. “The lowest was 1949—19,000. The three years nineteen fifty-two-three-four show the highest three-yearly aggregate of the century.”

“Go on,” said Lorimer, as if sincerely afraid that Jimmy might stop. As usual, he was revelling in it. His brilliant young men would assert and quote and refute; and then they’d turn eventually to him to select the right answer, the theme that would go home to the common man.

“Whether we have unemployment or full employ-

ment, a small volunteer army as in Edwardian times or a large and partly conscript one as today, whether the mood of the moment is patriotism or pacifism . . .” (Jimmy James kept half an eye on the note-paper where he had previously jotted down this careful rhetoric) “. . . between 25,000 and 35,000 new regulars join the Army every year. This has been true for half a century. Now why?”

“It obviously isn’t just unemployment,” said Jessie, so innocently trite that they could all have turned and hugged her on the spot.

“The present advertising—which everyone, including the NOI, apparently regards as ineffective—would seem, judging by these figures, to be doing the best job of recruiting that’s been done since the death of Queen Victoria.”

“Ah. But *can* you judge by these figures?” Neill alertly put one from his quota of platitudes into the common pool.

“I can tell you this,” he added, as if suddenly remembering a personal experience: “it isn’t just the advertising message. There’s a lot of pressure put on National Servicemen. They’re made to feel inferior. They’re made to feel that Regulars are as it were manlier and even braver——”

He spoke in a normal sincere voice, not in the special ‘sincere’ voice he reserved for creative meetings. It had quite an emotional effect. Evidently someone sometime in BAOR had hurt his feelings very badly.

“We’re forming a picture,” said Lorimer

ebulliently. "As usual, one can see an agency view beginning to emerge. Now, what about the woman's part in all this? Without wishing to guide your discussion one way or another, I'm sure that what the women think is going to be pretty important. Maybe terribly important."

Jessie's face was very serious. This was the hard-to-credit Jessie, who at business had won such a name for rising to an occasion and coping splendidly.

She said, "I think women look at it two ways. A soldier's uniform bowls them over—they can't resist it. They love uniforms but they hate war. They hate to see their menfolk march away."

'What about you?' thought Jimmy, trying as she spoke to get a glimpse of her real mind. 'What do you feel? Damn you, what do you actually think and feel about all this? Why don't you get up and go? Why don't you stand up and tell them you don't want any part in making widows of other women, and orphans of their sons?' The woman you love has to be noble, hasn't she? Or else there's no such thing as nobility.

Just then John Cox came in through the door, looking bluff and cheerful.

"Well, well. I take it everything's decided?"

"The debate continues," said Lorimer coldly. Cox should know better than to come bursting in half-way—a habit he'd got in Bertram's time. This was a meeting to encourage the cut and thrust of ideas. Cox now would flatten everything.

"Creatively," Cox began, without being asked, still

on his feet and so better able to dominate, "it's merely a question of finding the right symbol. Personify the Regular Army. Humanise it. It's not any longer the army of Rudyard Kipling and Bruce Bairnsfather. It's a technician's army now. And the key man is the young fellow you see on Saturday afternoons down a back street, mending an old motor-cycle. The chap who reads the *Mirror*, the chap who won the last war and will win the next, you mark my words." (Cox himself had gone through the war in an undistinguished backwater of Political Warfare. But he was already taking credit—on the score of his old contacts at the War House—for IAS getting drawn into the Army Recruiting set-up.) "Now put your man who reads the *Mirror* into uniform. Straighten his back. Make him hold up his head. Tone up his muscle, put a twinkle in his eye. And there you have your symbol—the Army of today."

"A big head," prompted Neill, as if the words Cox had just spoken had come to him as an immense revelation. "An absolutely first-rate scraper-board."

"You're catching on."

"I'm not so sure." Lorimer, when he dissented, was peculiarly gentle. "Let's not have too many preconceived ideas. Let's have some new thinking."

"If it's been done before . . ." Cox was blustering slightly. "I don't precisely recall when, but *if* it's been, you can be sure it was for one very good reason. It was successful."

Successful. Cox said it like a vintner approving a rare wine. Successful meant being able to order—

pay for on expense account—excellent little dinners in expensive places. It meant first-class railway tickets always; and the soothing deference of waiters and work-people, and a big, enviable car. It meant hand-made shoes.

Cox wriggled his toes inside his hand-made shoes. Successful. What more do you want?

"Please, John," said Lorimer softly. "You go so much too fast for most of us. You're way ahead. We're still trying to catch up on James's statistics."

"Yes?"

"So far as I could judge, they tended to prove the Army didn't really need an advertising campaign."

"James will come to that conclusion once too often," said Cox genially. "He'll find himself doing pure research in some tin-pot university for about a third of his present salary."

Behind his self-conscious smile, Jimmy James reflected, 'It's a thought, at that. Maybe I shall.'

"Well, Monk," said Cox, taking a chair at last and hunching down in it. "Tell us all what it's to be."

This was Monk's moment, and he reached for it with both hands.

"Like most ideas that really measure up to a situation," he began with a self-assurance that was almost embarrassing, "it may at first sound even a little absurd. We've had a number of ideas already. Now they all seemed completely reasonable—until we looked into them. For instance, someone—wasn't it you, Mr. James?—mentioned unemployment. But by

your own figures, unemployment hardly affects the intake of recruits, one way or the other."

Cox smiled, as if content to have been mildly snubbed by Lorimer, providing he could also see a research man discomfited. People paid too much attention to research. The really important thing was the creative approach—the vital idea.

Jessie thought, 'Here's Monk, coming out on top at everyone's expense, as usual. Yet he looks so clumsy—such a fool.'

"You made a point, sir, and a very valid one, about the power of women. And they certainly have power, here as everywhere. But though we can of course take full advantage of the attitudes of women, we are by and large powerless to change them. No amount of advertising will make mothers happy when they see their sons march away to war, or stop silly young girls from chasing after the soldiers."

"I frankly don't see where this is getting us," grumbled Cox. It was the old man who encouraged them to talk in this high-flown way. He'd like to turn every creative meeting into a cosmic brains trust. The real thing—his own way—was to sit down in front of a layout pad and think of winners.

"We need a theme that draws together all these powerful emotional impulses into one whole. Something universal in its appeal, but focusing light on the very heart of the nation's problem."

Monk paused for as long as it takes to count five. No one said a word. He knew he had them. "Something everybody longs for. Something that unites the

old soldier and the bereaved mother, the youth to whom idealism appeals and the youth who wants adventure."

"Come on, man," urged Lorimer impatiently.

"The theme is Peace." Monk dropped the word into Lorimer's lap. "Volunteer for Peace. Help Your Country Keep the Peace. No Bombs on Britain if You Keep the Peace."

The words of the copy he would later build into paragraphs came out slowly, firmly, sincerely. "No Bombs on Britain if You Keep the Peace," he repeated. People stopped thinking any more. It was a knock-out.

Lorimer was talking quietly. The histrionics had roused everyone's awareness, so what he said went home with additional effect. "I think it's a tremendous idea. Tremendous. If we can only get that one idea across, the advertising profession will have justified itself." Tapping his pencil on the paper he murmured, as if to himself, "Peace. Peace."

Cox couldn't let well alone. He said, "Isn't it a bit risky? Politically?"

"Nothing of the sort," Lorimer told him curtly. "It's the declared policy of the government of the day."

"How do you see it? I mean, visually?" asked Neill craftily, waiting to pounce.

Monk, having enjoyed his success, was now quite conciliatory. "Oh, maybe a big head," he said, like a victor conferring favours. "You know more about that than I do. Perhaps a very good scraper-board."

Neill smiled like a contented cat, and the severity of Cox's expression slackened. Monk, having dominated, was making his personal amends.

Jimmy James thought: 'They're crazy. They must be utterly crazy. Every government in the world talks that crap about peace, but who believes them? Who thinks you get peace by having a bigger army? Only the fat old women in the health resorts think of Britain as a bulwark of peace. What about the record since the war? Palestine, Malaya, Korea, Egypt, Kenya. One dirty sordid little war after another, fought by conscripts who knew no better and hated every minute of it. It's dirty and it's crazy, and the craziest thing about it is they don't realise it's crazy.'

Damn the consequences! "It's not a case of preserving peace. They don't want peace. They want cannon fodder. They want to use us as an ideological press-gang."

Lorimer smiled. It was such a sweet, understanding smile; and as soon as they saw it, everyone felt better, because Lorimer could be ruthless if he had to, and James's outburst was outrageous enough to justify pitching him neck and crop through the front door with a cheque in his trembling hand.

"It may sometimes look like that," said Lorimer, "in the cold light of day. To an analytical intellect such as yours. But these creative people can dress up a simple idea out of all recognition. Peace is a winner. We all recognise that. And the man in the street will spot it too. We'll really get a reaction, mark my words."

But James's feelings now were roused. He thought it was crazy, and he was going to say so. Though everyone else was looking slightly shocked, or even afraid, he felt for some obscure reason Jessie was approving of his stand. That made him decide to try a second time.

"I'm not talking about expediency, sir, but accuracy. We can't promise them peace because we can't deliver it. We're not selling peace. The probability is we're selling war."

"I've never in all my life heard anything more ridiculous," said Cox in his most heavyweight tone. "If I were to criticise a research report in the terms you have discussed Monk's idea—I measure my words—his brilliant creative idea, the Creative Department would never hear the last of it. It was brilliant; it can lift this sort of advertising right out of the rut."

"We all got a little too warm, maybe, in that discussion," said Lorimer. "But, after all, that's where the good ideas come from."

He was smiling contentedly like a man with an inner secret. He was in love with advertising, or more accurately, with a private, romantic and almost mystical view of what advertising might one day be, which he had created for himself out of after-dinner clichés.

"I definitely mean no disrespect," said Jimmy James, "to Monk's creative idea. As a creative idea I quite agree—it's probably quite extraordinarily brilliant."

Jessie came to his rescue. "I think I see what Mr.

James is after. He's wondering whether our story about Peace can be made to carry conviction."

So her approving manner had been because she didn't understand! She'd sided with his criticism only because it seemed to have a vein in it of advertising shrewdness, not because it seemed wrong to tell lies about peace and war.

"That's a creative problem," said Cox. "The sort of thing we tackle every day."

Christ, they were all lunatics!

Man had evolved language as a means of conveying ideas. And along with language had been evolved a useful set of principles about telling the truth, so that people knew more or less where they were when they tried to convey ideas to each other. To avoid confusion and bad blood, it was a good idea in everyday life to tell the truth. But it was particularly important to tell it about certain rather uncommon things. About history, so that we knew reasonably accurately how the present grew out of the past. About science, because science blew up in your face if you mixed it with make-believe. And about war and peace, because the ordinary people are always the ones to suffer; and only if they know what is really happening can they bring pressure to bear in time on the power maniacs.

With extraordinary lucidity these ideas formed themselves to Jimmy's mind into what seemed to him at that moment an argument of unbreakable logic. The argument wasn't really so logical but it seemed so because it was coloured by a deep feeling that what

they were discussing was immoral. This clever lying seemed an innocently amusing and profitable exercise, but it could take the whole human race to the edge of a precipice. In its own way it was quite as dangerous as bombs.

He found himself longing to preserve all he thought and felt at that moment; to live within the sense of illumination that was already fading as people around him moved their chairs and stood up and spoke to each other over his head.

Sardonically he told himself that a few quick drinks and an evening newspaper and a couple of radio programmes away, he would be once more judging the stuff pumped into his eyes and ears by its effectiveness and not by its truth. He'd be busy dirtying himself in it day after day, changing for the worse as he spent the money they paid him.

"You going to sit here all night?" asked Jessie's voice intimately in his ear.

The others were crowding through the door. The meeting was over.

"I was thinking."

"Tonight," she said, "you can buy me a drink. I mean a real drink."

"That's fine."

"I want to get in some practice. There'll be free drink at the party tomorrow."

"Not much," said Jimmy, who had made most of the arrangements for the office party this year.

"See you downstairs in ten minutes."

She wasn't even waiting to see if he wanted to. She

was right. Just at that moment with the strain of the meeting on him he was ready to follow her around and eat out of her hand.

Lying in wait for him on his desk was a rather complicated query about a singularly poor set of replies to a questionnaire. Somebody thought the questions were wrong; and somebody else thought the covering letter was wrong.

It had to be one or the other. Jimmy decided the letter was wrong. He'd written it himself. It simply listed the logical and sensible reasons for filling in the questionnaire, so it sounded quite bogus and unconvincing. "Try and talk Mr. Monk into writing us a good one," he told his secretary.

She was a nice girl with glasses and a third-class degree who had been told that the way to break in to the creative side of advertising and so earn a vast salary eventually was to start at the bottom as a shorthand-typist. But she was such a good shorthand-typist that there was very little chance of her ever being allowed to do anything else.

"Good-night, Mr. James."

"Good-night, May."

"Oh, I say. Before you go. Would you mind signing this petty cash voucher."

He tried to keep the impatience out of his face, but she must have sensed it. "Meeting someone?"

"What difference does it make if I am?" Jimmy snapped.

"I could have rung Reception and told them you were just coming," she said in a meek and trying-to-be-helpful voice.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm rather on edge."

"Oh, that's all right," she said, suddenly cheerful. "It's been quite a day, hasn't it?"

He tried not to gallop downstairs as the messenger boys did when they were in a hurry. But there's nothing harder to cope with than a mixture of decorum and impatience. At the corner of the landing he tripped and only just caught the banister in time. Someone behind him tittered loudly. He turned round quickly, but the door of the ladies' loo went click as the titterer slipped inside.

He walked the rest of the way quite sedately, feeling slightly middle-aged as he told himself that in a properly organised office they'd have a decent lift service. It was a mistake to convert these old houses to a purpose for which they were obviously never intended.

Glancing at his watch he found that so far it had taken him fourteen minutes. And she'd said ten.

She wasn't waiting at the bottom of the stairs. And if she'd gone off, who could blame her?

He stood in the hall, far enough away from the elegant receptionist to avoid her offers of help. Neill came out, blew a kiss at the receptionist and went past Jimmy James, ignoring him and humming a tune.

In his haste Jimmy had buttoned his overcoat crooked. Very slowly indeed he began to unbutton it,

then do it up right. He pulled down his sleeves, wriggled his shoulders, drew on his gloves one after the other and adjusted the fingers.

She would have taken it, surely, that he didn't want to go further with her than their café stage of intimacy. She'd interpret it as a rebuff.

He began to think out all the things he could say to her in the morning. They all sounded very feeble.

He turned around and there she was, fresh as a daisy, walking sexily down the stairs. Her legs, her body and her face dropped past the level of his eyes, and there she was in front of him.

"How nice," she said. She took his arm as bold as brass. Something had changed.

She giggled. "I saw you trip on the stairs. You did look silly."

"It wasn't so funny."

"It was tragic. But I've never seen you before with your dignity upset. You were sweet. It makes me wonder."

"Yes?"

"What's your temper like at breakfast?"

She was leading him down the steps to the street, still arm-in-arm. Instead of answering with a joke of his own, he quite suddenly began to feel alarmed. This was flaunting it. There were times when he'd laid it on rather thick. Had she taken him too seriously?

"What sort of drink," he asked, "and where?"

"Let's go to some man's pub. I'd like to drink out of a glass with a handle."

He took her all the way to Finch's in Holborn. It was quite a walk through the thick rush-hour crowds. She kept her hand firmly in the crook of his arm. They didn't have their usual chit-chat; or even play their usual game of running helter-skelter like children to the safety of the islands, when crossing against the traffic.

Finch's wasn't very full. They went into the gloomy room at the back. Jessie smiled at the barmaid, and tried to make her smile back while he ordered a Worthington and a Guinness.

"Look here," he said, "would you mind pouring that Guinness into a glass with a handle."

"It's not gone flat, if that's what you mean."

"The lady happens to prefer a glass with a handle."

His wife would have been stiff with indignation at the fuss he was making. She hated making trouble, even for people like barmaids, who seem almost to enjoy waiting on other people.

"You never serve ladies in a tankard. Ladies have a glass," explained the barmaid indulgently. This time she smiled, as if they'd been very whimsical.

"Why shouldn't ladies have a glass with a handle?" asked Jessie, as they sat on stools at a knee-high table and watched a drably dressed man with a moustache stand with a plate in one hand and eat a cold pork pie with far too much mustard.

"It's a piece of sexual symbolism. Little girls don't have handles."

"But little boys do."

"More's the pity."

"But less fun—doing it with pollen, like the bees."

"Flowers do it with pollen. Bees go chasing up after the queen bee, and do it once, and die."

"I didn't know that."

"It's a lovely death." And so it was, a flyer's death, high up in the blue sky, with the sun overhead and the white clouds beneath.

She reached out a gloved hand and put it softly on his wrist.

"Am I being terrible?"

"Do you want to talk about last night?"

At the meeting, she and bloody Neill hadn't once looked at each other. That might mean anything.

"No . . . yes. Yes, I will, if you like. It was rather funny. I spent the night with him, but I kept thinking of you. Doesn't that sound awful?"

"It does, rather."

There was pressure on his hand. She was making his fist turn into a hand by straightening out finger after finger. She put her hand flat on his.

"You know why I took up with him in the first place?"

"He's younger than I am. He isn't married either." He had pulled his hand away, and was running it over the top of his head where, even though the mirror didn't show it, they said his red hair was getting thin.

"Don't be so remorseless. I feel badly enough about it. Yes, I wanted to make you jealous. But that wasn't all. I kept thinking about the war, harking back. If I shut my eyes, I could think you were Tony's father.

It was a desperate attempt, last night, with David Neill, to snap myself out of it."

There was a long, long pause. She was afraid to say any more, and afraid too of what he would say when he finally spoke. Perhaps, by being so frank, she had ruined everything between them.

"Listen," he said at last, "I'm me and you're you. The war and all that is over and done with. It's something in our minds we carry around and can't get rid of. I'm a married man, and in case you don't know it, my wife is going to have a baby."

She opened her eyes at that, wide open, like a big doll that says "Mamma!"

"A baby?" Her mouth, too, was partially open, and she was stuffing her gloved knuckles against her teeth. "When's it going to be?"

"A long time yet. Six months or so. In the summer."

This time it was her turn for a long pause.

"Are you glad?"

"I don't know."

"But aren't men glad—generally?"

"I don't know." Then, counter-attacking desperately, "Was *he*?"

She looked down so that he couldn't see her eyes, and intently drank some beer. He expected her to choke, but she didn't.

"The last time was actually the day before he was killed. We had a great quarrel. It doesn't seem so important now, but at the time I was heartbroken. I'd told him about the baby and he'd wanted me to

get rid of it. It sounds so awful, doesn't it? He kept offering me money."

Evidently this was something that until then she had almost succeeded in forgetting.

"Well?"

"There was so much killing and death just then. You couldn't get away from it. I mean death."

"Only go on if you really want to."

"Perhaps it would have been easier. I realise that now. In one way I realised it then. I could have come out of the Wrens and had a good time and found a husband, like everybody else."

"Find a husband? But you're so—" he found the word he wanted—"bewitching."

She smiled with unabashed pleasure.

"Not really a husband. That's the difficulty. There's Tony, too."

He said nothing. A sense of guilty unease was chilling him now; he remembered all the silly, flirtatious talk that had passed between them. Had she taken that all too seriously?

"It's not easy. To consider another person, a child, more than one considers oneself. I know women are supposed to do it instinctively, as part of their nature. But it's not entirely true. With other women it's done for them—by wedding days and habit and what will the neighbours say. Well?"

"Well what?"

"Do you love me?" She said it, not like it's said on the films, but almost sardonically.

"I don't know," he said. "You scare me."

"Anyway," she said, "the thing we had before is all over. The nice silly thing, with the cream cakes, that didn't harm anybody. In fact, it's nearly all over, now. It's different tonight, don't you notice?"

"I don't know about loving you," he said. "I know I want to sleep with you. I know the place is as dull as sin when you're not around."

"That's honest, anyway."

"How about it?"

"I wish we didn't have to talk about it so much."

"But I feel for you, as a person."

"You mean you don't want to hurt me?" She looked dubious, like someone who has been hurt a lot, but never admitted it.

"I mean just looking at you drives me crazy."

In quite a different voice, she said, "You too will have a baby to look after. Had you thought of that?"

It had never struck Jimmy James that he might have to look after the baby. He would pay the bills, naturally, and pat its head. That was quite enough.

"You're a very splendid person. And bewitching."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Say so, then."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. I loved you even last night, with that silly young man. I kept thinking: he'd make such a joke of it all. He'd make it all seem new, from the word go."

"I generally think of myself as gloomy."

"Sometimes you are, but you always see things in a

new way. I love you, too. I'd do anything for you."

"Let's go somewhere else," he said, "with soft lights and strong drinks and background music. I've sort of got used to background music."

"There's no need for that expense. You don't have to pour drink into this one. She loves you."

"I love you too, darling."

"Or we could walk to Holborn Tube Station, and say good-night there, as usual."

Though he probably ought to have been virile and aggressive, he found himself thinking, 'Let's choose the right time and the right place. Let's be clever about it.'

They went through the swing doors, saying an unthinking "Good-night" to the "Good-night" of the barmaid.

"Well then," he said, when they were outside, on the pavement.

She put an arm round his waist, for answer, and they walked along the dark street, clung together, and momentarily bound by a feeling stronger than each of them had ever felt for anyone in the world. Yet by the time they got to the bus stop, their new feeling made them so sure of each other that they were able to say good-bye as easily as if it were any other night.

CHAPTER FIVE

David Neill's flat had become rather a disappointment to him.

He'd seen the attic rooms—they'd been pretty tatty then—and bought the lease because he could visualise how they'd look done up. One room business-like and functional, because when you were working or in bed you obviously didn't want to look at the pattern on the wallpaper. The other was furnished to the eyes—a set piece. A kitchenette with running hot water and a tin opener. He'd visualised it and had great fun buying and decorating. Now it had gone sad on him.

At art school and then again in the Army, this flat had been a vital part of the dream. A flat of his own, the key in his pocket, in the heart of the West End. That was something to brood about in the boy-and-girl affairs frustrated for lack of a bed the right side of a bolted door. It had been nice to think of later, too, lying awake in barracks amid the stink of unwashed clothes, listening to the muttering of the conscripts who were having nightmares.

First you needed money, but for a commercial artist that was no more difficult than for any other highly skilled technician. The fine artist nowadays was an anachronism: to prosper at art as at anything

else one must give the customer what he wanted.

Here he was with the Yale lock sprung and the long-playing record revolving softly and the coffee gurgling through the patent coffee-maker. If only he could admit it, damned lonely.

It had been too cold for the char to open the windows while she vacuumed his bedroom. That meant Jessie's sweet reminiscent odour was still hanging around the place from the night before, like a faint realisation of guilt.

Not that he need reproach himself. Practically she'd stage-managed the whole thing. She was blatant about her husband-hunting.

He took the hot coffee-pot and carried it from the kitchen into the stark workroom. With careful punctilio he was arranging his work-table and pouring out his black coffee, as if trying to recapture by a sequence of gesticulations some feeling of what the flat was supposed to mean to him. His home; his sanctuary; the luxurious bandit cave from which he made his raids and to which he returned with his booty and fair captives. But it still felt as lonely as furniture in a lit window after they've shut shop and gone home.

On his drawing-board was an envelope of cuttings drawn from the IAS library. The reference tab on the outside was 'Army, Soldiers'.

He sorted the cuttings, putting on one side the officer types and the quaint period pieces. Those pathetic 1914-1918 faces trying to look prematurely manly behind their scrubby little moustaches, and the unhappy-looking rankers in puttees.

Spread out before him were the dozen or so of the chaps the advertisement would have to imagine. Whatever they were doing, they all looked slightly resentful, and Neill knew what they were feeling.

Where was everyone's idealised soldier boy, the man that sweethearts and even mothers remembered with pride? Young, vigorous, self-reliant—the sort of man, as the saying went, that you'd be glad to have beside you in a tight corner.

With delicate, skilful strokes of the pen, as unself-consciously as a man signing his name, Neill started to draw into the face which had slowly been built up on the white pad before him, the crowsfeet that come partly from good humour, partly from looking candidly into the open-air distance.

Then he propped the sketch against the upright of his reading lamp and stood away to look.

The drawing stared back, with a bloody-minded, bolshie glower.

He turned that drawing face downward, and began again. In his mind's eye he tried to imagine an actual person. Cheerful, self-reliant, brave, a good man in a tight corner . . . like the character in the war film who gets killed and you're sad about it. As if his right hand were in a state of subtle rebellion, he found it drawing a picture of Gregory Peck. That wouldn't do, it wasn't sincere. This had to be sincere.

The PRO at the War Office would no doubt have just the pictorial reference he was looking for. Somewhere there must be dozens of such propaganda

pictures. Dozens of times they must have photographed a soldier looking symbolic.

In a sideboard by the far wall was a drop in the bottom of a fat bottle of brandy. He poured it into a cupful of tepid black coffee still remaining in the percolator. Obstinate he ripped away the last sheet of paper, and began once more to draw.

He tried a succession of tricks. What's the use of being a master of graphic technique if you don't know a lot of tricks? Once or twice he got near to it, but then an accidental touch of the pen would bring out a sneer or wince or scowl.

He stuck the half-dozen rough drawings around his table, propping them against books like a rogues' gallery. He turned his back and then turned around rapidly as if hoping to catch them off their guard.

But they leered up at him, like the awkward squad or a crowd of malcontents in a beastly barrack room.

The copy, he decided, must be wrong. Psychologically wrong; factually wrong, wrong in every way. This scheme just wasn't visual. How can you use a soldier to symbolise peace? Nobody will believe it; not really believe it. Peace is a young girl with long loose hair, and her arms full of corn sheaves.

He took a clean sheet, and started at random to draw a girl with long, loose hair—not that they'd ever use her in the scheme. It was hard getting the essential innocence into her expression. It had to be like Botticelli, only better if possible; but instead ghostly across her face drifted a vague leer of invitation, and he seemed to hear the hoarse impersonal

voice asking for a match, and promising him a lot of fun, dearie. So he purposely changed her face into the hard face of one of the girls in Old Compton Street, and drew a fag in the corner of her mouth, and then took a stub of charcoal and scrawled figure eights over and over her face until she had disappeared.

CHAPTER SIX

Few marriages get to the extreme point where one partner has a headache so the other bangs all the doors. Couples go on for a long time making the ordinary courtesies and confidences of everyday life. In fact, people who are really bored and even exasperated with each other show it only by flashes; in other respects they act almost as if they were comfortably in love.

Jimmy came in from the street with a smile on his face. It was gleaming there when he opened the door, or Sarah might have thought it was a tribute to her clean blouse and brushed hair and supper hot on the table. Tonight she had planned to get him into a calm frame of mind, so as to discuss things rationally. For weeks now he'd been changing—it was not just the tension of his nerves, but as if he were changing into someone else altogether.

Now here he was with that silly smile, his face relaxed into a much younger face. They were still on good enough terms to tell each other commonplace bits of good news. The smile might be a Christmas bonus or a bit of business success. But he didn't tell her, not a word. At last she realised it could only be one thing: another woman.

He was affable, and even said how much he liked

her hair. That made him so insufferably like an ordinary considerate loving husband that she wanted to scream. Only after being unfaithful are they kind to you—is that the idea?

She thought, 'I must keep calm and rational, try to see his point of view.' How she despised women who had great blinding emotional rows!

She said, "You look as if you've been at the cream."

"Cream cakes?" He was wilfully misunderstanding. That made her even more sure. "Not tonight. When the big meeting was over, I went to the pub, to unwind a little."

"I'm wondering what you'd say or do," she said cryptically, "if I asked you how that lipstick got on your collar."

His face went as red as his hair. He pushed his plate away, went to the mirror.

"Nothing there," he said, his voice hoarse with anger, "and there couldn't have been."

"There wasn't. But you had to look to make sure." She was looking at him very directly, asking questions with her eyes. Inwardly she was ashamed of having tried to trick him. At that moment, if he'd only admitted it, she'd have held him close to her and completely forgiven him.

"A cheap little trick," he said. "No confidence."

"Go on," she urged him, "get it off your mind."

He knew just what he was going to say. 'How can you have a marriage where there's so little mutual confidence that you have to stay alert for verbal traps?' Then, thinking of Jessie, he accused himself:

'You're a fine one to talk about mutual confidence.'

"Then let me say it," she said. "What would you think if you came back here one night—you're normally observant—and caught me with a grin on my face like a cat on the tiles, and all the signs of another man upstairs in the bedroom?"

He looked at the unusually careful way she was dressed, and glanced towards the door, as though wishing he were uninhibited and low-minded enough to go upstairs and actually look. Because she too was quite different tonight, fresher, as though she'd been waiting for someone.

"One of your Communist friends, no doubt," he remarked savagely, "with no particular moral scruples."

"You'd like to believe that, wouldn't you."

"Actually I'd find it rather hard to believe," he said. "I thought we got on rather well together, in that respect."

"You think I'm a sort of satisfied cow." She felt her own anger rise. "You do your little trick and then go on your way leaving me grateful and doting. I'm a piece of your property—a clock you have to wind up the right way, and it'll chime all right for the next seven days."

"Property!" he expostulated. "You're further from being a piece of property than any woman I have ever met. At the start, that was mainly why I liked you."

"And now?" They stood facing each other. She was holding the back of a kitchen chair, and her knuckles were white. It was a long time since he'd seen her looking so handsome.

He thought, 'It's one of these turning points, when one must at all costs be honest.' "Living with you is a sort of reproach. If you were mainly interested in clothes and new curtains, then I could patronise you. But I can't even meet you on equal terms. You're not just interested in ideas in an abstract way; you act as if they had to be put into effect at once, today—as if they were much more important than housekeeping——"

"They are."

"Were we sitting over a drink, discussing life in the abstract, I might agree with you; in principle, so long as you took no further notice. But here you are, living as though the world were in a state of permanent crisis——"

Her eyes incredulous, she said, "Don't try to tell me that the world isn't in a state of permanent crisis——"

"How much does it worry our neighbours? They vote at elections and listen to the news. But they seem to lead fairly reasonable lives."

For the moment she chose to ignore the woman on the way home, who had brought such a smile on his face. He'd put forward something she really couldn't ignore—a false idea.

They found themselves in the lounge. The fire was raging, and for the special occasion this evening was intended to be, she'd even bought a couple of bottles of beer.

"The neighbours," she established the point at which their conversation had been broken. "But they do worry, indeed they do. I shouldn't be surprised if

they wake up screaming. Look at the awful papers they read—what a frightening projection of their inner fears. And consider their pleasures—how ghastly! Watch the telly, play bridge; drive to the top of Box Hill and look at the view without even getting out of the car.”

“I know you’ve never liked it here,” he told her. “We could move to Hampstead. You’d have congenial friends. You could wheel the baby on the Heath.”

“You hate me for having my own ideas,” she said experimentally.

“I don’t hate you,” he said, as carefully as if he were on oath. “Nor do I love you, not in the romantic sense. I respect you, though. You might even say, admire. And some things about you exasperate me beyond endurance.”

“Like cobwebs. And burnt porridge.”

“Yes.”

“Really,” she said with a grin, pouring out the beer so fast it fizzed over the lip of the glass, “you want some busy little woman for your wife, and me for your mistress. Probably,” she glanced up at him, “I’m not sexy enough to be your mistress.”

“In that respect,” he said, “you’ll do.”

“Will I?” Her eyes were gleaming with faint pleasure. “I’ve often wondered.”

They sipped the beer and felt oddly at peace with each other.

She was experienced enough in debate not to have overlooked her original point, the woman—it must have been a woman—who had brought the smile to

his lips. She thought, 'It would be a pity to spoil this feeling.' But she couldn't leave it alone.

"What do people do when they reach this stage? It's no bad thing, I suppose, talking it over rationally. I'm never too clear on this personal stuff. What happens now? You go your way and I go mine?"

"Rational be damned," he said. "If I find another man in your bedroom I'll kick him downstairs."

"It's all nonsense, anyway," she said finally. "There's something we're both forgetting. The baby."

After a long pause he said. "Shall we go to bed early?"

"We might as well." And then, "Have you got anything worth reading?"

He dropped off to sleep quickly. Even mild emotions exhausted him, and tonight had been a lulu. She lay there in a bed-jacket with only one button left on it, reading about a dope-gang in California and trying not to think. With most people it would have been easy, but Sarah was normally so accustomed to thinking that she found it hard to stop.

Why did life have to be such a *mess*? Why couldn't marriage be on a definite theoretical basis, like a contract, or even like the Prayer Book, so long as you knew where you were; certain duties, definite obligations.

'Whatever happens,' she thought, 'I mustn't let the baby become a bone of contention. I'll leave him flat rather than let him spoil my baby's life.'

Then she knew she was being overwrought about it

all. Why should he of all people resent the child? Once she was tied down with a squawking little object that needed feeding every four hours, he'd got her where every man secretly wanted his wife: ministering to his creature comforts, and with no separate life of her own.

She put the book down, switched the light off and lay there in the darkness, defiantly glad that she was pregnant. It was against her principles to fight to keep Jimmy just for herself, but if her child needed a normal home and a father, that was another matter altogether.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"These pills of mine are only pheno-barbitone. They help you relax."

"I don't believe in pills." Lorimer's bass voice spoke out like someone repeating an article of faith.

"Or a couple of aspirins. It's not as if aspirins would harm you."

"They wouldn't do me any good, either." He grinned. He'd taken aspirin at the office because his secretary nagged him to. That was one concession to weakness that his wife need never know about.

It was all pure affection on her part. He'd years ago given up being even mildly exasperated at her solicitude. She was just fond of him, concerned for him as, to tell the truth, he was concerned for her. He tried to hide from her in some way the fact that his usual nightmares were plaguing him, but there wasn't room for much concealment when you still slept in the same old-fashioned bed you had shared since you married and set up house. Half-way between a question and an ultimatum, she said:

"You're not going to the Christmas party tomorrow?"

"I most certainly am."

"But look at yourself in the mirror."

They had separate dressing tables. Lorimer went

across to his own with its single, four-square masculine mirror, and the pair of ebony-backed military hair-brushes, and its little leather box for studs and cuff-links.

"The girl at work thought I had 'flu," he said with a chuckle. He had the sort of middle-aged face that looks worse than it feels. Under his eyes the hollows were black and even dissipated-looking.

"All I need," he said, with a grin like the grin of a skull, "is one good night's sleep."

She knew him. It was of a piece with his character that he should constantly drive himself and never admit to being ill. It went side by side with his particular solicitude for people at IAS who fell ill and so failed on the job. But that solicitude was a mask. Secretly he had a poor opinion of anyone who let himself be mastered by his body.

"Will you drink a nightcap if I make you one?"

"Naturally," he said with a smile, his bass voice booming. A nightcap wasn't drugs. It was all but convivial. "And please don't waste time persuading me to cut the firm's party tomorrow. I must be there of necessity—and so must you. Mrs. Bertram isn't coming, so it's our place to act as hosts."

He gave a little emphasis to the word 'hosts'. He was a man who relished doing the right thing in the proper way.

When he was a boy he'd lived in a corner house with a whitened doorstep and clean lace curtains, looking on to the main road. Round the corner was a rough side street where they neither dressed nor be-

haved properly, an object lesson. All through childhood his mother had drawn distinctions about the right way and the wrong way to behave. It had built up in his mind the vague but powerful impression that somewhere in the upper reaches of society was a place where everyone observed good manners and correct etiquette, where in fact everyone treated everyone else with astonishing considerateness.

Of course the daily actualities of business—not to mention his four years in the Army in Flanders—taught him that people can behave perfectly courteously at one moment and like jungle beasts an hour later. The decorum of an officers' mess, for instance, was in its way a counterpoise, a compensation, for the eventual moment when like men gone insane they must run gun in hand with their men strung out behind them to kill another bunch of men as unwilling and yet as insane as they themselves.

She brought him something steaming in a mug. The smell of rum came drifting across their bedroom. Rum and milk—something she had a passion for, and something that for years he'd been meaning to tell her he loathed. Though it wasn't as acrid and bitingly distinctive as the jars of rum that came far too infrequently down the line, the smell alone was a disgusting reminder. He forced himself to begin drinking it, getting a certain amount of pleasure out of the fact that he wasn't giving way to his repugnance.

"That was a kind thought," he said, and he felt his mouth flex in one of the smiles he was driven to use with clients he disliked.

"If you want to leave the reading light on, I don't much mind," she said, in a soft, hesitant, tentative voice.

That was the last straw. He got into bed, put the half-empty rum-and-milk beaker down on the bedside table where his open notebook lay, and reached up for the light-cord.

"I'm going to count three," he said, trying to get a joking sound into his voice, but inwardly raging with anger. As if he were a child that needed a night-light to soothe its fears! Being angry was wrong; but this once he was entitled to be angry, so long as he didn't lose command of himself.

She started pretending to be flustered, pulling out hairpins and wedging her elbows into her pink night-dress.

"One . . . two . . ."

"Oh don't. Don't!"

It was mimic fear. It was a game that went back thirty years, and most of the point had gone out of it these days.

"Three!"

He snapped off the light.

She was coming tiptoe across the bedroom carpet, feeling her way, pretending to stumble clumsily against the furniture.

In the dark he started once more on his hot, acrid drink, taking it like medicine in neat sips. Trying to keep the surface level so that it didn't spill.

"Steady when you get in," he warned; "I'm drinking."

The springs went down with a gasp on her side as she sat on the edge of the bed and kicked off her furlined slippers and started fumbling woman-like with the covers. Remarkable if you came to think of it that this thick-set comfortable woman, kindness incarnate, should have been the bony, small-breasted cigarette-smoking girl in a cloche hat he had courted back in the days when he was selling space. But the up-to-date clothes and fast slang had been something she picked up over her typewriter at the office. Behind it all there was another little house with a white step and lace curtains similar to his own. Once married she began to put on weight and the familiar humdrum kindness took command. They had a lot more money now, and she had the spending of it; but it didn't seem to come naturally to her.

When for some good reason he entertained a business acquaintance at home, she had only one measure of judgment, "Nice." Or sometimes, "Not a nice man." But her judgment of character was good, and he depended on it more than he let her realise.

She had one word, too, for his bad dreams. It was the word that covered all the nervous aberrations of men of his age, the men she had waved good-bye to, whose names had later made up the monotonously long and terrifying casualty lists in the dingy war-time papers. Shell-shock.

It made her feel helpless with love for him, helpless as a man for his part feels when his woman is going through the agony of having a baby. They wanted children but had none; by the time they were in a

position to afford them, none came along. So she had in some way transferred to him those feelings of helpless sympathy and tenderness that he would no doubt have felt for her when she was bringing new life into the world. Of the two of them, he was the one who had been called upon to suffer: he'd really gone through it, even though he never talked about it to her. The livid scars still there on his thick ageing body were some of the physical evidence; but worst of all was the shell-shock.

She heard the faint clink as the beaker was put down empty on the bedside table.

"They reckon it helps," she said timidly, "if you can bring yourself to talk about it." Never before had she made such a direct hint, not in thirty years. Apprehensively it seemed to her she was getting close to man's central mystery; getting at grips with his pride.

"Not if there's nothing to talk about."

"You're sleeping so badly, night after night," she accused him.

"I've got a lot to worry me. Take this new account."

"Yes?"

"You know what it means? Apart from the money? These Government plums generally go to a small circle of the big boys. We're breaking into that circle, small as we are. We're being recognised as good."

"Yes. What's the account about?"

"It's for one of the Ministries."

Not that it was a secret any more. But putting it like that meant that he needn't go into detail.

"I'm sure you'll do your best." She reached out an arm towards him. He had his back towards her, and there were inches between them. She pulled him towards her bosom, folding an arm round his chest. He let himself go slightly towards the comfort of her body, and put a hand up gently to touch her forearm.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she murmured sleepily, comfortingly. She might have been reassuring a child. In the daytime he never openly admitted to feeling fear, not even in trifles. How dare she guess that the nightmare when it occurred made him really afraid?

He tried to move his lips to kiss her arm, in reply, but by its slack weight he realised that already she was asleep.

He was alone and vulnerable once more.

One way of diminishing the horror of the nightmare was by going slowly, matter-of-factly, even jocularly through what had actually happened. As he might have told it playing the old soldier to a bunch of cronies at the club, when there were no youngsters about to be civil, sceptical and inwardly bored.

With the young clerks from his office he had joined up, aged seventeen, amid all the patriotic excitement at the start of the war. He'd been a sober youth, looking older than he really was.

He got out to France before the fighting had quite settled down to the stultified trench systems interlock-

ing with each other all the way across Europe from the Alps to the sea.

He had been pitchforked into a regiment made up chiefly of Welsh miners. A good many of them spoke Welsh in preference to English, and all their standards were utterly different. Although they were warm-hearted men in a rough, outlandish way he couldn't help feeling intensely isolated.

The Army was banal, boring, nerve-racking. He was chronically lonely. After the placid cosiness of the house with the lace curtains, it was like being put against your will into an alien uniform to fight the wars of a foreign country.

In the first six or seven weeks, training under canvas and waiting, apprehensively eager for the eventual move to France, he hit on the principles that carried him through the War and indeed through the rest of his life. Stick it out. Never give up. Never admit fatigue or wince at pain. Treat other people decently, but always go one better than them, in every way.

His nightmares sprang from a time, shortly after arriving in France, when the extraordinary strain of active service had gone far enough to strip his resilience, but not so far as to imbue him with the dumb endurance of the veteran. The front hadn't settled down, nor had the attitudes of war themselves become hardened and protecting. It was all new and fearful.

It was the second or third time he had come close enough to the Germans actually to see them as well as hear their gunfire. It was in a place on the borders

of France and Belgium where beneath the undulating sandy soil ran the innumerable tunnels of a coal-field.

The fighting was upon the earth—and also underneath it. The Germans came into the coalmines from one end, and Lorimer's Welsh infantrymen went down to meet them from the other.

Some of the seams were reached by deep pits. But many others were shallow, and a man could walk down a drift and be in the propped tunnels of the mine in a few minutes; it was in these that the serious fighting took place.

There it was, the black mine, and the sun only a few minutes overhead. Around were his mates, softly cursing in Welsh and moving around expertly like pitmen bred.

He was there, holding his rifle like a staff, uniquely lonely and helpless. Endurance didn't help. A man had to be active and effective. Yet it was terribly dark.

Somewhere ahead, someone young enough not to fear firedamp struck a match.

Lorimer's heart filled with happiness. A light! He could see! Those shapes were Taffy and Dai and ahead of them the sergeant.

Somewhere farther ahead still, one shot rang out from a German sniper's rifle. The lighted match fizzed as it fell and went out. The man who was holding it fell and was also dead.

The sergeant dropped on one knee, and gave the place from which the rifle had been fired an exhibi-

tion of fifteen-rounds-rapid as taught before 1914 in the musketry schools of the Regular Army.

Everybody felt better, inspired. As well as being shot at one could shoot back.

"Keep your tongues still," whispered the sergeant boldly, but Lorimer had known he was afraid too. That day they were all afraid. "Keep moving forward."

The sniper, unscathed in the darkness, shot towards the sound of the sergeant's voice. Lorimer heard the bullet smack into the sergeant. It made a noise like a cricket ball missing your hands and hitting your chest hard. If Lorimer shut his eyes forty years later, he could still recall the ugly noise of that thump.

"Come on, lads," said someone with false confidence.

"Shut your flaming gob," a voice hissed.

"Let's do for the bastard," whispered a third. He might have meant either the man who spoke too loud, or the sniper up ahead. However, he showed what he meant. They were all ready to turn and run, but he began resolutely to move forward.

They mopped up that sniper. To Lorimer, who was hanging back as far as he dare, it was all sounds. Gasps, blows, a random shot that struck the coal face and ricocheted with a whine and a thud into pit-props. Then a gurgle, and someone chuckled guiltily.

Farther on, the Germans had mounted a machine-gun at an intersection where five dark underground

tunnels met, three from the French side and two from the Belgian. It had been when confronted with that peremptory machine-gun a few seconds later that every man in Lorimer's outfit except himself had been killed.

Lying awake in the apprehensive darkness of his bedroom, with the taste of rum still on his tongue, Lorimer knew he could have told that much without difficulty to a sympathetic audience, just as an anecdote:

"We went into that coalmine then. The chaps in my unit had mostly been Welsh miners, so they knew their way about rather better than I did. Ran into a sniper. He got our sergeant and one man who was damn fool enough to light a match. But we sorted out the sniper and went ahead. It was pretty weird, of course, total darkness. Then we ran into the Jerry machine-gun, and things got rather disagreeable."

Yet, so far he could ape the proper tone of voice.

But how to explain the overwhelming effect on oneself of the machine-gun? Talking away, filling the black echoing tunnel with its loud, authoritative voice. Like lances of steel flung blindly and deafeningly everywhere through the darkness, towards the advancing soldiers' soft and vulnerable bodies.

He'd tried to control himself, flung full length in the coal-dust, by saying bits of the Twenty-Third Psalm. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ." But the emphatic throbbing gun was slashing away overhead as a sickle cuts at wheat. The black air of the tunnel was full of breathless,

whistling metal. Men were screaming and gasping, and up ahead some badly wounded man was saying something softly in Welsh that might have been blasphemy and might even have been prayers.

Then it was again black silence.

Up ahead a voice spoke something in German. Thereafter, ever since that moment, Lorimer had inwardly hated Germans and Germany. The voice was harsh, and seemed to be mockingly exultant.

Somebody lit an electric torch and after a pause walked forward. He had a pistol in his hand, and was turning over the prone bodies one by one with his foot, and firing into them again. To Lorimer it was frightening and horrible. This German was acting not like a soldier but like an officer in charge of a firing squad, carrying out the last stage of an execution.

Then came the extraordinary moment when he realised that the object in his hand was not a mere piece of wood and metal, but a gun. Without the conscious promptings of will his recently-trained arms and hands raised the rifle and pushed the butt against his cheek. He remembered to get the shoulders of the rear sight the same height as the tip of the foresight, and to squeeze, not pull, the trigger.

He was quite surprised, after the sudden noise of the gun, when the German officer dropped his torch so that it shone at random against a wall. The officer himself stood stiffly for a moment in an inhuman attitude. As he fell, he made just the same sound as the sergeant had made after the bullet struck him.

Lorimer understood that killing their officer would betray him to the other Germans.

He lay at full length, hugging the black, gritty floor of the mine, trying to cleave to the rock, trying to blend and merge with it and become part of it. Over his head once more smacked and whined the machine-gun bullets.

Fear was heaving a small, soft body in this place of blackness, rock and flying bullets. Fear held him to the floor, gripped each of his limbs and held them down as if by magnetic force.

In his heart he felt he had done wrong by shooting that officer, and now he was going to pay for it.

When the first bullet hit him and the pain began, he knew that was just the start of the payment. The strength was going, had suddenly gone from his body. The pain was covering him like a deluge of fire. Nothing he himself could do would help any more. He had acted deliberately for the first and last time when he raised his rifle to shoot at the officer. Now all he could do was to lie still with the pain flooding over him, too full of pain to think of anything but pain itself, but knowing inwardly with the scrap of consciousness remaining that his solitary chance was for someone to pull him by head or heels out of this dark deathly tunnel, and into the light.

Sure enough, someone had done it. Someone he didn't know had picked him up wounded, he didn't

know how or when; and he'd gone back through field dressing station and base hospital to England.

When his wound had healed, he'd gone up for his commission and been regarded with respectful awe as a veteran by fresh-faced youngsters actually older than himself.

Then, too quickly to grasp the difference, he was an officer, a young subaltern. Dark-browed miners spoke English to him, not Welsh, and called him sir. His mother kept a photograph of him wearing his Sam Browne in a velvet-edged frame on the corner of the front-room piano. There were new things to learn every day. There was the etiquette of the regimental mess as counterpoise to the mortal rugby-scrum of combat.

Having his men to look after had made a difference, that and his now hardened views about endurance. His hands hadn't begun to shake again until the last year of the war, the time of Jerry's big push, and then in no time another wound had taken him back to England and out of the territory of stress.

The memory of that fighting stayed buried until he'd got so used to thinking of himself as a business man that he quite forgot he had ever been a soldier. The nightmares took their present form after a bout of 'flu, in the year the slump started.

In these repetitive dreams, the happenings in that mine were drawn and dragged out of shape, and blown up to incredible proportions. The mine itself swelled to a black cathedral, or sank to the dimensions of a coffin. The bullets like jets of acid

burned as they ate into him. The sergeant seemed sometimes as big as a tree, and then fell enormously like a man falling off a cliff. The German officer's voice rang out like a voice greatly distorted by loud-speakers, ringing inside his head and in the air around. He himself, the boy Lorimer, was sometimes a babe, sometimes a middle-aged man, but though he was essentially himself in the nightmare he seemed rather to permeate the dream than play a distinct part in it. Now he was the sniper, now the victim. Now he was the dead body as a pistol bullet thudded into it. Now he was the officer raising his pistol, or someone in the darkness desperately raising his heavy rifle and trying to look over the sights.

But the incidents of the dream were quite secondary to the overwhelming feeling of deprivation and loss—the devastating loneliness. Nothing, not prayer or inward courage or a woman's love, could in that moment comfort and succour him.

At the point where he was almost but not quite falling into sleep, and the dream with its hypnotic ramifications was starting to take possession of his entire brain, he reached out and quickly pulled the hanging light-switch.

The light came right down into his wife's eyes. It was unkind of him and he knew it. Maybe she also would wake and not be able to get to sleep again. It would have been kinder to have left the light on, as she had first suggested. Kinder but weaker.

He got out of bed, groped for his slippers, fumbled across to the bathroom and back again. That was deception, but it might serve as a good reason for putting on the light.

When he came back she was sitting up in bed, pushing the fallen hair out of her eyes.

"This new account," she said, "what Government department did you say it was?"

"I didn't."

"Well?"

"It's confidential."

"Oh—humbug!"

They looked at each other, angry and yet bewildered like a young couple about to have their first quarrel on their honeymoon.

"All right," he said, trying to force his mouth into a grin. "It's the War Office. A recruiting campaign for the Army."

"I thought it might be something worrying," she said placidly, arranging a hand-knitted bed-jacket around her shoulders and sitting up as if preparing for a long conversational session.

"So I talk in my sleep?" he mumbled.

"What sleep you have. And so of course I don't sleep either. Well, maybe some. But hardly any."

"I don't see a connection."

"You just don't remember. What about before the War? Sitting up in bed till all hours trying to persuade me that we ought to buy ourselves gas-masks and practise putting them on? All at once you were

terribly worried about poison gas. Long before the Government gave us all free gas-masks—and useless things they were too.”

“Good God!” It sounded now like utter panic. Maybe that was why he’d forgotten.

“And going back a bit there was the slump. The fortnight the firm lost nearly all its business—when Bertram went mad and wanted to sack everyone.”

“I don’t see it.”

“But I do. All your talk about sticking it out and pulling through together. But Bertram daren’t have sacked you. He had the posh connections, but you did all the work. But you felt as if it was the war over again.”

“And this time?”

She paused before answering. “Do you have to take this new account?”

“There’s not much question; we shan’t get it. All we have is an outside chance. If we actually land it I for one shall be very much surprised.”

“But you don’t really like the idea.” She was telling him what he really thought, rather than asking him a question.

“Of a recruiting campaign? Well, it’s no new thing, my dear. It’s been part of the advertising business ever since ‘Kitchener Wants You’.” He stuck out his forefinger at her and grinned.

She said with an answering smile, “But you’ve not got a Kitchener moustache. Thank goodness.”

“This time we’ll try to make it a little more positive, more constructive.” He hoped it would sound

genuinely impressive, as at their meeting that day: 'Join up to defend peace'.

But here at night in the quiet bedroom the meaning had drained away. Maybe Monk's slogans weren't so good as they'd first sounded. He leaned over and made a note in his open pad on the table to have a second critical look at them in the morning.

"But what's it got to do with you?" she said. "How much do you and I know about peace and all that? It's a tricky thing. You've got to study it. Myself, I wouldn't like to say."

With mock malice he said, "And yet they gave the flappers the vote."

"Seriously," she asked him, "ought you to mess around with altering people's ideas? It's not like making out that soap is whiter and brighter and all that other jolly nonsense that no one really believes."

"We've got some pretty bright people at IAS."

"Ah, but the difference is surely, the Government know what they're doing."

Lorimer thought of that flat, windy and ineffectual brief the civil servants had provided. He sighed.

"Let's drop it," he said flatly. "What about the party tomorrow. Decided what you're going to wear?"

She stretched mountainously and started to drift a little way down in the bed between the sheets. She knew he'd be all right now; in some obscure way the evil in his mind had been neutralised.

"It's between my black *crêpe-de-chine* and that dark blue velvet."

"I'd rather see you in the velvet," he said, trying

deliberately to fill his mind with the recollection of how she had been to his touch when she was younger, thinking back to the warm, bony eager feel of her body then, sliding down in comfort beside her and thinking with a deliberate access of self-indulgence about the young girls at the party tomorrow with their shiny hair and soft complexions and firm, delicious figures, moving and gliding in coloured dresses to the music; remembering accidental touches against breast or thigh in the lift or the Tube, and lying back in some other bed, and someone with a soft mouth smothering him with kisses.

After a while, when he was breathing evenly and deeply, his wife reached up carefully for the light and clicked it off. He was asleep, and now she was awake. It was more important that he should sleep, but she wished they could both sleep. She would need to look her best tomorrow to play hostess at the firm's party.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The party was to be held in a Bloomsbury hotel, by no means first-rate, the sort of place one associates with potted palms and luncheons for professors from London University.

Jimmy James was supposed to be concerned with the catering arrangements. He went to the hotel in his lunch-time and checked that things were going ahead more or less as they should.

"And by the way," he said, "did you get my assistant's message about a double room?"

It hadn't been his assistant who rang up, but Jimmy James himself, to say that he and his wife wouldn't be able to get home that night, so would they book accommodation.

Once 'Auld Lang Syne' had been played, no one would notice him and Jessie making their way upstairs, while the others went out into the December night. They'd both be in an ideal mood, enough drinks, a little dancing, a little nervous excitement. At their mature age these things had to be carefully arranged.

Back in his office he couldn't keep his mind on work. Holding his internal phone by the mouthpiece, like a blackjack, he dialled Jessie's number. From the constraint in her voice he knew she had someone with her.

"That you, Jessie?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Too late tonight after the party to go home. I've booked us a room at the hotel."

"That's good."

"O.K.?"

"That's fine. Suits me fine. I'll make all the arrangements at my end."

Putting his mouth close to the mouthpiece, though in fact he'd already made sure his secretary wasn't eavesdropping, he said, "Love."

"I couldn't agree with you more."

"You're very sweet, as well as very clever."

"They're both important, you know. Well—good-bye."

"Good-bye."

He wrote a couple of pages of his report, planchette fashion; then his outside phone rang. "Yes—this is Mr. James."

"Oh, Jimmy. How severe you sound."

Glibly he said, "I thought you were Mass Observation." It was his wife.

"Well."

"Well?"

"Well, I've decided to come to your beastly old party."

"But at breakfast you said how you'd hate it."

"I've been thinking."

"Oh?"

"We mustn't start living in separate worlds."

"Say that again."

"We're beginning to live in separate worlds."

"Separate what?" He could hear perfectly well. Separate worlds. He scarcely knew why he bothered with the pretence.

"We used to have so much in common. So much. I can't bear the thought of us drifting apart like this."

He felt careful with her, wary, as he would have been with a suddenly restive client.

Before there'd been comradeship, yes, but also independence. He was the one earning all the money, but sometimes she'd got a perfectly unnecessary half-time job, because she felt she ought. The free and easy way they'd lived had always been taken for granted. But the baby would stop all that. Everything was going to become hard and fast.

"What's that got to do," he asked, "with coming to the party?"

"Can't you understand?" she told him fiercely. Or rather, it wasn't her. It was a disembodied voice in the earpiece of a telephone, which subtly distorted the contralto, making it sound more masculine and strident.

"I can't see the connection," he said. "Why not stay at home and get your feet up?"

Her next outburst was completely inexplicable. "If you think the baby is going to give you the whip hand over me, I'll go somewhere and get rid of the beastly little brat this very day——"

"No," he was saying urgently. "Don't ever say that, not even for a threat. Don't even think it." He looked

over his shoulder to make sure no one had come in and overheard. He wanted badly to ring off, but it was essential to talk her out of this. One after the other he said all the ordinary, banal things that he hoped would calm her down. Yet even while he pleaded with her a lower layer of his mind was thinking hopefully, 'Maybe now she's upset she won't come after all.'

The voice in the telephone was calmer now. "Look—that was unforgivable. So much like blackmail."

"What do you mean—blackmail?"

"It was despicable."

"All right, have it your own way. Just tell me what you want."

"I've suddenly become afraid of losing you."

"Afraid? You afraid?"

"So helpless with this baby coming. I've been sitting on the bed all morning. Trying to imagine what life will be like when you're gone."

With his free hand he shuffled some papers on his desk, as if trying to insinuate himself back at work again. "Such nonsense," he said. But from the phone still came this importunate voice, like yet unlike his wife's, from which some trick of the telephone was stripping away all the self-confidence.

"Maybe I shouldn't blurt it all out," she said, trying bitterly to make a joke. "If I had any sense, I'd hire a private detective."

He could visualise her at the other end of the phone. Her eyes would be moist, as they always be-

came when she got upset, but she would now have the dogged look on her face of the girl who has been given a badly hacked shin at hockey, but is still trying hard not to let the side down.

He felt pretty low and treacherous when he said, "That party tonight. Just one long bore."

"But I've treated your job as a joke for far too long. It's time I met the people you work with."

There'd be no arguing her out of it. She was like all these emancipated women. Stuffed full of pertinent facts on economics and politics, yet when it came to running their personal lives, they took their advice from the back pages of a woman's magazine. "When he neglects you, take more interest in his job." Yah!

"Here comes Mass Observation," he lied, "on the other line." After a long, ominously quiet pause, came the click of her receiver going down.

Looking at the phone as if it were an enemy, he realised that though this might be commonplace to others it was new to him, lying to his wife. You don't lie to your friends, and they had been friends.

The whole thing made him feel rather dirty, and needing a drink, but the pubs had just closed for the afternoon.

He went to the door, and looked out cautiously. His secretary was typing away like a woman obsessed; she didn't even look up. He closed the door quietly and dialled Jessie again on the internal phone.

"You on your own?"

"Oh yes. I got all that, earlier. Aren't you clever?"

"Look—this is awkward. My wife has just announced she's coming to the party."

"Oh. Well. That makes it more than usually like a bad French farce." She was oddly bitter, like someone who has heard all this before.

"I say. I'm sorry."

"There's no need. I felt like crying off, anyway. It's begun to make me feel guilty."

"Guilty?" There was no reply from the telephone in his hand. "You're being absurd," he said sharply. He held the receiver down for a moment, then slapped it down and started biting the thumbnail on his left hand. He'd not felt so cheated since he was a boy, when instead of the bicycle they had promised him for Christmas, he was given the *Children's Encyclopædia* to help him get through his exams.

Jimmy James had the job of supervising the arrangements for the dance so he was due at the hotel early. That meant Sarah would be arriving unescorted. He tried not to think of her, to wonder what clothes the mood would take her to wear tonight—either utterly correct or godawful. Would she wash her hair and leave it all unkempt?

The ballroom was empty except for a woman scattering French chalk across the wood-block floor and a man in brown overalls fussily arranging gilt chairs and music-stands.

The band came in at the same time as the extra waiters, a mob of men all wearing raincoats over their

evening dress, but some carrying instruments. The saxophonist helped the drummer carry in and set up his elaborate gear. They were chaffing each other in subdued voices, and now and then there'd be a burst of open laughter.

"I know exactly," the bandleader told Jimmy James. "Lots of strict tempo numbers at the start. And later on the slushy old ones."

"No jiving," Jimmy warned him.

"Not one hot number? Come on, mister, give the kids a break."

"Well—maybe just one."

"They all got long grey beards?"

Mrs. Bertram last year had casually expressed the opinion that jitterbugging was degrading, but no one had thought to tell Jimmy James that this year Mrs. Bertram wasn't coming.

Then the first over-eager guests arrived, the woman who brought round the cups of tea, on the arm of a man with smarmed-down hair and a powder-blue suit with enormous shoulders. Jimmy ultimately recognised him as the odd-job man who lived by day in the stoke-hole.

Lorimer had democratic prejudices; no one, however humble his job, must be excluded from the firm's party.

Jimmy went across the slippery floor to them.

"I suppose we're too early," said the stoker, defensively.

"The champagne's not opened yet," said Jimmy. "Come downstairs and I'll buy you a glass of beer."

In the bar he bought them each a drink actually with his own money. He had one himself. He felt generous and convivial, as if this were a personal private party with no strings attached.

"All comes out of expenses, I suppose?" said the stoker with a sour kind of knowingness.

"Some of them are nice," said the tea-lady, before the stoker had finished speaking. "Mr. Lorimer's nice. If it wasn't for Mr. Lorimer I wouldn't stay. He always remembers your name and says hello and did you have a nice holiday."

"Lot of parasites," the stoker told Jimmy. "And don't they fancy themselves. All on twenty quid a week. Isn't that a fact?"

"Yes."

"Do you get that much?"

Now everyone in advertising does it strictly for the money, and many, even though overpaid already, are obsessed with getting yet more money to poultice their vanity. Yet no one ever likes to say exactly how much. People don't mind hinting at a gross lie, but they boggle at a straight question.

"Pretty nearly," he said, the words jamming somewhat in his mouth.

"You don't honestly earn it, do you?" said the stoker aggressively. "Compared with a coal-miner, I mean." He looked slightly inspired, like a well-brilliantined minor prophet. Probably he'd been sinking pints in the pub since the moment they opened, getting up a good pressure of loving-kindness ready for the party.

Instead of returning him his rudeness with knobs on, Jimmy grinned feebly, and mumbled: "That's a matter of opinion."

"Well, I ask you. I got nothing against you personally, mind. But you don't earn it. See what I mean?" He transferred his glass to his left hand and flexed his right arm, fist-clenched-watch-my-muscle.

"You has to be very clever," said the tea-lady, placatingly.

"Well, do you?" asked the stoker. "Are you all that clever?"

Jimmy finished off his nasty, gone-sour drink. "You might say we're all parasites," he said. He longed to add, 'And you're another. With muscles like that, why aren't you down a coal-mine yourself, instead of loafing in our stoke-hole?'

The tea-lady dipped into her Guinness and came up with a tiny moustache of froth. "Now now. Mustn't quarrel with your bread-and-butter."

Jimmy said, "Time I got along. Got to organise the champagne."

"Champagne," said the stoker derisively. "We used to shave in that stuff. In France, I mean."

'Leave you with a nice tingling after-effect,' reflected Jimmy, walking away and trying to think of a joke quick, before rage took possession of him.

That was Sarah's working class for you. Why, oh why sacrifice yourself?

The word that hurt most was 'clever'. He remembered being beaten over the head with a slate in a hidden corner of the playground for being 'too clever'.

That was before slates were abolished as unhygienic; before he won his first scholarship.

'Christ,' he thought. 'What's getting into you? Aren't you working class yourself?' There should have been a nice reassuring glow—"Of course I am!"—but there wasn't and hadn't been for a long time.

A man in a red coat was walking up the stairs towards the ballroom entrance. He had a list of names in his hand, and the off-hand manner of one who does something of the sort almost every night.

Shortly after, Mr. Lorimer and his wife appeared, all spick and span, and took a stance near the man in the red coat. They began vacantly practising their smiles on the empty ballroom.

"Your wife coming, James?"

"Yes, sir. Later on."

'Wonder if I can spot her,' Lorimer reflected. Some fellows' wives were pretty rum, and the strange thing was the most unlikely-looking couples often seemed the happiest.

John Cox and his wife came up, shook hands, looked around perfunctorily and went down to the bar. Cox's wife looked rather like a West End barmaid—the same high gloss. But in fact she had once been a brilliant woman copywriter, much more accomplished than her husband could ever hope to be. Now she was taking her meals from a bottle, and the drink made her blowsy, and a bit crazy sometimes, too: she had fits of not caring any more what people thought.

Monk and his wife were coming up the stairs now.

A plain woman with lots of character, rather irritatingly dressed.

"He's our senior copywriter," whispered Lorimer to his wife. "Not a bad one, either."

"How do you do, Mr. Monk."

"How do, Monk."

"And Mrs. Monk. So pleased that you could come."

"Charming dress."

Even though he lingered a moment longer than he should have done, Monk had no time to say anything witty or memorable to his Managing Director. He found himself staring into space, holding out a recently-wrung hand.

Someone who was following Jimmy James's carefully-rehearsed instructions put a glass of champagne in it. He stood looking at the glass as though it were a strange glittering insect.

"Where are all the other directors?" Mrs. Monk asked him.

"Where are the other directors?" Monk asked one of the secretaries, looking unwontedly sexy in paste ear-rings and a low-cut gown.

"Mrs. Bertram's not coming. There must be one or two due to arrive. Mr. Bryant was in Manchester until late this afternoon—he'll turn up later, I suppose."

"Mr. Cox?" asked Mrs. Monk. She knew he was Cyril's immediate boss.

"He's down in the bar," said the glamorous secretary, with an all-inclusive glance of curiosity and derision for Monk's dowdy wife, "Need one ask?"

"Let's go down to the bar," said Agnes Monk, firmly.

David Neill came up, a little late, and alone.

His eyes and hair shone, and he rattled up the stairs indecorously fast. This was the sort of thing he loved. He could hear the band blaring and fading distantly and there was the shuffling crowd, men in dark suits in amidst the bare powdered shoulders and waved hair of the women. One could smell the wine and the perfume.

"Mr. Neill."

"Your wife not here, Mr. Neill?"

"He's a bachelor," Lorimer corrected his wife. "A confirmed bachelor, I should say."

"I may get trapped this evening," Neill said, waving a hand towards the woman-filled ballroom. "Look at them all laying traps."

Lorimer chuckled and Mrs. Lorimer thought he was a handsome, intelligent-looking boy, and eventually some nice girl would be lucky.

Two women came up the stairs almost together. One was dressed in a dark-blue two-piece, with straight but untidy, newly-washed hair, a fresh face, and clean cuffs. Except for her hair, she looked like a lady doctor. The other was Jessie Garland, dressed to knock 'em cold.

"Mrs. James; Mrs. Garland," rotundly enunciated the man in the red coat.

The two women looked at each other, then quickly

looked away and composed their faces. Jessie let Sarah James go forward first to shake hands.

"Your husband's somewhere over there," said Mrs. Lorimer.

Lorimer was surprised that James should have married such an intellectual, hygienic-looking woman. One had somehow pictured Mrs. James as rather ordinary yet affectionate, not unlike his own wife, someone nice to come home to.

"Such a sweet frock, Mrs. Garland."

"And yours is very nice, too," said Jessie. No one else so far had told Mrs. Lorimer what she was longing to hear, that she looked nice, too. They'd all been too much in awe.

Jessie and Sarah took a couple of self-conscious steps in diverging directions, then paused and walked together towards the ballroom.

"Do you happen to know my husband?" asked Sarah, rather coldly. "I mean actually work with him?"

"He's very brilliant."

"And what do you do?" Warmer, this time.

"I'm an account executive."

"Now what does that mean?"

"Isn't it rather a bore?"

"Not a bit. I don't understand advertising. I really want to know."

Sarah was looking around the ballroom as they sat in deep basketwork chairs in one corner, sipping the champagne someone had efficiently handed them. While Jessie went on talking, indolently but accur-

ately, about the functions of an account executive, Sarah watched the floor. Jimmy's new woman must logically be one of those creatures out there dancing or sitting around having drinks. Where else could he meet other women but at work? Probably a scheming young girl, full of false innocence but really quite heartless.

Her eye was caught by Neill, the most accomplished dancer on the floor, partnering the picture-page beauty with the languid charm who worked as a receptionist. She was the loveliest. But it couldn't be her. Jimmy would be scared stiff of anyone quite that good-looking. She found herself grinning painfully. She thought, 'I've got to be self-possessed. I must take this rationally.' But the grin tugged its insane helpless crack across her face.

It was obviously new, worse, more serious this time. Other times he'd always fallen for someone quite out of the question, and had nice agonised romantic love affairs safely inside his own head. His symptoms were as recognisable as measles. He'd be irritable and distraught like a sick child; earlier she'd mothered him through such crises without his even realising. When it came to protecting her marriage she had all kinds of impulsive knowledge that her highly educated conscious intellect normally never took into account.

She didn't pretend to understand why men like Jimmy behaved in such an irrational way. Apart from one exploratory student affaire, Jimmy had been her only man. At their very first meeting he'd made a flattering attack on her, directing at her an armament

perfected for doing fast lines with wartime popsies. But the day when he thought she had surrendered really marked his own capitulation, for this was peacetime. Romances of such intensity were directed by one's friends towards actual marriage with all the remorselessness that the conventions of the superficially unconventional can bring to bear.

She'd thought then that he was terrific. She'd begun to feel within herself the very overwhelming love that he had talked about so much and so recklessly. Nothing like his lovemaking had ever happened to her before; she wasn't prepared for anything so disturbing. But apart from that there was satisfaction in realising that intellectually he was nobody's fool. An outstandingly good brain. College contemporaries who now had made big careers were openly in awe of him. He could have made a big career for himself but for his knack of seeing the funny side. He couldn't face the preliminary humbug, the genteel toad-eating. Instead, he'd wanted her, or that was how he'd put it, anyway. For he couldn't very well marry her or even possess her body without coming to terms also with her ideas and the life that consequently she wanted to lead.

As a student when she called herself a Communist he'd thought to himself, 'She'll grow out of it.' Almost everyone else was visibly growing out of it, with their careers to think about and the cold war starting. And she obviously wasn't a Communist in the copy-book sense—just a highly educated girl, grown up through the anti-Fascist years, whose reasoning powers

had somehow taken total command of her. She presumably did have an irrational, impulsive side, but up to now it had been under such permanent control that it hardly showed itself even in bed. When she said "love" she meant it like the Prayer Book: "For-saking all others . . . "with my body I thee worship." She meant love like they speak of it in great poetry, like it was once and may be again, but certainly isn't nowadays.

She wanted to reduce the world to a reasonable, sensible, humane and ordered state; but that meant accepting a logically connected view of the world that only made any sort of sense if one stood inside looking out. From outside where Jimmy stood, Marxism seemed as fraudulent in its promises as any other theology, and he'd told her so, often.

Her logically reasonable system depended ultimately on her personal happiness. When Jimmy went off and stood sentimentally under the window of some silly young girl there was nothing in her systematic ideology to apply to the gnawing pain. Many if not most of the others were in politics because they were unhappy: childhood or marriage haunted them, so they hid in the Party. But she had started from happiness—what had once been a secure happiness; "with my body I thee worship." Jimmy had tried to explain to her once how profoundly useless he felt his life to be. She had looked at him, sincerely incredulous. Wasn't there such an enormous amount of good waiting to be done in the world, most of all in the political field?

You could say they didn't understand each other, but isn't that the normal situation between human beings?

Turning in her chair, empty wine-glass in hand, she said to Jessie Garland: "And is your husband here?"

"I've only got my little boy," said Jessie; it was her usual way of avoiding a precise answer. "He's just ten."

"How nice."

"And I hear you're expecting your first this summer," said Jessie, innocently.

As soon as she spoke, Sarah knew with a quick, fatal certainty that this Mrs. Garland must be the one. He would have told no one but her. It just wasn't his nature—she knew him. With others at the office he'd keep quiet about their baby. But the one he was serious about, he'd tell her, because between the two of them the coming baby would be a terrific obstacle.

She turned to look at Jessie. How insulting that he should pick on an older woman. Sweetly pretty, she said the words inwardly with a sarcastic intonation. Not an idea in her head. Conventional.

Jessie coloured up under Sarah's cold eye. So she knew! He wouldn't have told her, but even so she knew. By the change in her manner, she had somehow just discovered.

Sarah said, in a voice devoid of excitement, "Yes, we're both quite excited. It's our first, you know."

"Yes, I did know. And you're keeping well?"

"I feel a bit queasy sometimes in the morning."

"I was just the same. It went on for months and months."

At that moment, Jimmy James came up, his ginger hair ruffled and a lopsided smile across his face. The pair of them—talking away as thick as thieves! How could he keep the embarrassment out of his face and manner?

"I'd like to dance," said Sarah, abruptly getting up. She had left her handbag in the deep chair. Jessie said, "Let me mind your bag."

She watched him as they moved off together. They danced rather awkwardly, more like strangers than man and wife. They were talking, and not casually either; the talk had upset their dancing.

Out on the floor, Sarah said, "That's her, isn't it?"

All at once his mind was filled with a clamouring variety of unconvincing-sounding lies. He pushed them down, and answered, "Yes."

"Rather conventional, isn't she?"

"You don't plan these things in advance, you know."

"Don't you?" He felt her, momentarily, holding him more firmly, almost as if trying to encourage him. He felt she might shake him fiercely, like a mother trying to shake the truth out of a child.

"It's more complicated than you might think."

"Pretty straightforward to me."

"Well, it isn't."

"I suppose you're making love to each other." Though she meant it coldly and sarcastically, somehow that was a deeply emotional statement. As if compelled to hurt herself once again by saying it in

another way, she went on: "Sleeping together."

"No," he said, "in fact we're not. We might have drifted into it. But not yet. It's more complicated."

"She's got a little boy."

"Yes."

"Have you seen him?"

"No."

"I'm glad. I don't want you playing father to some other woman's child." Yet she was shocked at her tongue bursting out in this way. "Some other woman's child"—where had she caught the expression? Children were children. Why care, anyway?

He said nothing.

"So you didn't want me to come to the dance? I quite see why."

"Not altogether like that. It's all so complicated."

She thought, 'If he uses the word "complicated" again I'll scream.' She put a great effort into making her voice sound nonchalant.

"You can spend the whole evening with her as far as I'm concerned. This is a dance and I'm going to dance with anyone who asks me."

Then the music ended. He dropped his right hand from her shoulders. Avoiding each other's eyes, they clapped the band. They went back to the basket chairs, Jimmy lagging behind. Jessie had got more drinks, three filled wine-glasses. If they were going to have one of those difficult triangular conversations, a little champagne would help to take off the sharp corners.

Then the music started again, and someone asked

Sarah to dance. A young man from the studio who hadn't quite managed to scrub the paint out of his finger-nails. With this young man her dancing was much more co-ordinated. The eyes of the men on the floor who really enjoyed good dancing began to turn her way. Afterwards, there was no more champagne, but Sarah stood by her partner a long way off and smoked a cigarette, without conversing.

"She knows, doesn't she?" asked Jessie.

"Oh yes, she knows." He already felt weary, as if it had already been fought out, and he'd lost. Though lost what?

"You didn't tell her?"

"She jumped to the conclusion. When she asked me a direct question, I admitted it." 'Here am I,' he reflected, 'talking of Sarah as though she were an enemy.'

"There always comes a point where you're bound to stop lying."

"And we've reached it, have we?"

"Yes, we're there." She leaned forward poutingly with a cigarette in her mouth, and he struck a match for her. "Wer'n't you rather rude to me on the phone this afternoon?"

The quiet, gentle phrase chilled him. Already she was taking possession, beginning to check and chide and run his life generally.

"I'm sorry. All at once it got a bit much."

"From now on it won't be any easier. We shan't exactly float on a cloud of bliss."

"There'll be some bliss, surely?"

"Oh, tons of bliss—eventually." Eventually, from

the way she said it, appeared a very long way off.

"Bliss," he said, "like masses of white cotton-wool."

But this wasn't the moment for their private language, for Sarah was back again, dragging rather against his will a young man with broad shoulders and a bad complexion about which he was very self-conscious. He was some sort of clerk at IAS.

"This is Larry," said Sarah. "Jimmy, move over and give Larry the seat near me. Larry, this is my husband, and he's neglecting me. You know that awful woman he's with?"

Larry giggled as if these remarks were meant to be taken as a joke. Sarah's hair was untidier. Her manner was of someone unused to drink who accidentally takes one too many and then starts saying and doing unpardonable things.

In a quiet voice, just for Sarah to hear, Jimmy said, "There's no need to get hysterical."

"Oh Christ!" said Sarah. Rising to her feet she grabbed her young man. The music was starting up again, with a bang-thump-bang-and-crash of the cymbals.

"That's not hysteria," said Jessie, in a monstrously quiet voice, "it's unhappiness."

When she spoke of Sarah's unhappiness she might have been diagnosing what had upset someone else's child, like 'over-ripe fruit' or 'too much excitement'. But there couldn't be much happiness in this for her either. She'd be quite entitled to walk out on him. But instead, her manner seemed calmly affectionate and even protective.

That, in its way, was alarming too, because it meant that from now on his own wishes and preferences were going to count for nothing. He'd be fought over by two women, contending not only for themselves but for their children born and unborn.

He wanted at that moment to throw in his hand, grab the first silly empty-headed girl he saw and whirl her round the dance floor, fast enough to forget everything.

Just then Lorimer came by.

"Enjoying yourselves?"

"Wonderfully," said Jessie. From her tone, anyone would have sworn that she meant it.

"I saw your wife out on the dance floor."

"She's enjoying herself too," said Jimmy, hoping it didn't sound too sarcastic.

It was the one and only jiving session of the evening. No longer was it a 'firm's party', with everyone sourly watching everyone else. For the first time, everyone was having a wonderfully good time, as if their restraints and dislikes had all dropped away. Now began the authentic dance with limbs and hair whirling, eyes flashing, people backing away to admire the prowess of the experts, and underneath it all a terrific beat from the band.

Anxiously, he looked around for Sarah.

She was having one hell of a good time. Other dancers had formed a ring around them: the broad-shouldered young man too was a very accomplished dancer.

Then there was a silly little scream, an octave above

the saxophone. Everyone looked round. She skidded with outflung arm across the polished floor. Someone laughed, and then there was a sort of collective gasp. At a signal from the band-leader, the band stopped playing. They caught a glimpse of her, lying on the floor, with her skirt above her knees. Then people began to cluster round.

"Get her up to our room." Jessie took his wrist, pulling him forward.

No time to think how odd it was. They were out of the ballroom with her and into an iron-grilled lift, going up, before he realised what a mess there was likely to be.

In the ballroom behind them the momentary hush was over, as the band struck up and the dancers began to move round and around again, but more slowly.

Two or three foxtrots later, when the floor was cleared and the room was full of chatter instead of music, a few people noticed Jessie come back into the ballroom, and they clustered round to ask how Mrs. James was doing.

"Have you sent for a doctor?"

"There's no need. Just a few bruises. I've come to get her a glass of wine."

The band had started again when she went out with the stem of the glass between her fingers and the surface of the wine shaking in tiny waves from the vibration.

"Monk," Monk was saying. "As a matter of fact it's the family name of the Dukes of Albemarle."

"Good Christ!" muttered Gertie Cox. They'd all four of them been in the bar since the word go. Gertie would tolerate any company so long as she was near a bottle. She'd even begun to see the funny side. Of everyone here tonight, John and this man Monk had least in common. Now they were tight and going to reckless extremes for topics of conversation. Mrs. Monk was sweating freely and her bun was coming apart. She had drunk a number of glasses of cider under the impression that it was virtually non-alcoholic.

"Let me fix your hair," said Gertie, a cold gleam in her eye. There was something in the way she enunciated the word 'fix'. "Now, Gertie," said John Cox, half-heartedly.

Mrs. Monk's eye swivelled around, like a hunted creature in a corner. She fainted feebly with a "No, please," but she couldn't take risks with her husband's career, could she? So she sat glumly on a bar-stool and surrendered her crowning glory into Gertie's malicious hands.

"Now they'll play for hours," said John Cox, moving around the bar a little to give Gertie elbow-room, and ordering another double gin. As an afterthought, and with perceptible grudgingness, he ordered one for Monk too.

Cox hadn't bought drinks for three rounds. But this round only involved two drinks, so he was keeping his end up. Monk was desperately trying to trans-

form this evening of drinking into the beginnings of a beautiful friendship. Just lately he'd been gnawed by a fear that Lorimer was beginning to dislike him, and he knew he wouldn't feel safe without at least one friend on the board. Yet at quite another level—an awareness that came and went intermittently and was of no use in governing his actions—he also knew that behaving like this was quite shameful and absurd.

"You saw the new Field Readership Index?" he asked challengingly. Someone was claiming that an eight-inch double solus would pull practically as well as a ten across three. It was the sort of knotty point which really intellectual advertising men could argue indefinitely.

"I don't waste time on that crap," said Cox.

"Not even for the laughs?" Monk was only checked for a moment. He changed his tone, the expression on his face. In a frenzy he reflected, 'Why do I degrade myself? Why don't I go off to a cottage in the country and live simply and write something worthwhile. Like essays about nature.'

The irrelevant touch of sarcasm in his voice triggered off Cox. "I'll tell you what's wrong with you, Monk," he pronounced with wagging finger. "You never relax. Maybe you think that sounds big. But it's nothing of the sort. One day you'll realise it takes a big man to know the right time to relax." Cox stretched his elbows sideways and blew out his chest, then subsided and leaned against the bar in a relaxed attitude.

"I relax," said Monk, "of course I relax. But when I'm on the job I'm on the job."

"It's not even a job," said Cox, "it's a racket. Call it a profession? Don't make me laugh. It's a profession like running a mock auction's a profession. You're a professional liar." Anyone else uttering this heresy in Cox's hearing would have blighted his career for good and all. But it didn't count if you said it yourself; you said it to test other people out.

"Not at all," said Monk, his eyes glazed and his mouth full of plums, but coming back head down for yet more punishment. "In fact we're anonymous devisers of contemporary mythology."

"Did you hear this drunkard," Cox asked his wife triumphantly, "say 'contemporary mythology'?"

"Scissors in my handbag," she gobbled through a mouthful of hairpins. "And do shut up, this is bloody difficult."

Agnes Monk was sitting abjectly on a lonely bar-stool with her head dropped forward, and her long thick hair hiding her face.

She was physically so tense that while Gertie rummaged for the nail scissors she just sat there, motionless. Blinded by her hair, she could hear the sardonic voice of Mr. Cox upbraiding her husband. If she didn't endure what was going to happen, she would only make matters worse. Cyril had already explained what a hell of a time he'd have, day in, day out, without a single friend on the board. In some way he was sure he'd upset Lorimer over this recruiting scheme. They'd be watching him, waiting for one false move.

He'd need a friend on the board more than ever before. She was accustomed to him dramatising his daily struggle for existence. She believed every word, and so sat waiting stiffly, loyally, for the cold touch of the scissors.

Behind the bar, moving amidst his glittering bottles, the barman smiled an artificially indulgent smile. This was Liberty Hall, so long as you paid the damage.

At the other end of the bar, a group of serious drinkers hardly looked up to see what was happening. New arrivals stared curiously until they actually got one hand around a full glass, then the usual dull inward-turning look appeared in their fading eyes.

"But you'd look so much younger with a fringe!" Gertie Cox had the massive aplomb of a surgeon with a favourite operation.

Cyril Monk felt the muscles in his face go stiff. There was a dead feeling in his lips. Drink took him that way, so did embarrassment. As the scissor blades grated together, he stared at his glass of gin.

"Contemporary mythology," he repeated doggedly.

"Lavatory walls," retorted Cox.

Snip, snip, snip.

"One side's a bit short," said Gertie breezily, "but it'll grow out in time."

Monk turned around now to look at the fringe. He could feel them all waiting for his reaction: Cox sardonically; Gertie Cox with a sort of mocking defiance; his own wife with a wet pleading look like a dog that has been trodden on.

"Nice," he said, "very nice. Quite professional."

Pushing her fingers through the scissor holes with an eager, crooked smile, Gertie said, "I wonder if I could do an urchin cut?"

("That's Gertie Cox," said someone from IAS at the other end of the bar. "Playing hell. She wears French knickers. How do I know? Last year she did hand-stands against the wall.")

Agnes Monk had just discovered that by turning her head she could study her shaggy hair-do in the mirror behind the bar.

Her mouth dropped open.

"If only I had a snap of you now," said Gertie, flexing her nail scissors. "It's priceless."

"I think I won't have an urchin cut," said Agnes Monk like a queasy little girl at a birthday party refusing a second helping. "Thank you very much, you did your best. But I won't take up any more of your time. I'll just find the ladies' room now, and thank you very much."

She put her left hand half-way to her forehead, as if trying to push out of her eyes the hair that wasn't growing there any more.

Monk and she exchanged glances, each looking contemptuously into the other's eyes.

Cox didn't propose to have any interference from the hotel management. All right, so Gertie got drunk every year and raised hell. It was a party, wasn't it? With an expansive gesture he put a pound note down on the bar. "Clean up that mess," he said, flicking the note like so much trash.

After a long while a bent old man with a white jacket came in and swept up the bits of hair. The people in the bar waited until Gertie and her party were gone, so that they could tell newcomers the story, with suitable exaggerations, of course.

Very much later a porter came in with a message for Mr. Monk to say that his wife had gone home, but when Cox looked round to give him the message he wasn't there any more, either.

The double room upstairs had two very narrow twin beds in it. Sarah lay on one with a quilt over her and her eyes closed. Jessie sat uncomfortably on the edge of the other bed, watching her. Jimmy watched her, too, but all he could think of was the stupid but persistent notion of how difficult one would have found it with two close-clung bodies in such a narrow bed.

Jessie assured him that Sarah wasn't going to have anything spectacular like a miscarriage. Women understood these things, there is a sort of free-masonry. She'd strained her ankle and given herself a nasty bruise. But the damaging thing was the shock, the moment of fear, and evidently she had got over that. She was asleep now, or it looked like it, anyway.

After agreeing by an exchange of glances to leave her resting, they got up to tiptoe out of the room. But Sarah opened her eyes. In an unexpectedly strong voice she said, "Stay here, both of you."

A grey, fixed look had come over Jessie's face. She

looked older, and anxious to dodge the fight that was now coming.

Sarah sat up and kicked the quilt to the foot of the bed. Her wrist-watch had been twisted, and she straightened it.

Sarah said, "Shall we try to settle this like civilised human beings?"

Sitting there waiting, he felt cold and isolated, as if shrunk into himself, an inert male trophy between the pair of them. Very soon they'd be asking him to choose, one way or the other, and yet whatever he chose would be wrong. In a situation like this, whatever you do is cowardly. There's absolutely no way of coming out of it with credit.

Sarah began by pretending to concede the victory.

"If you're taking Jimmy away from me, there are certain facts about him you should know." Was she going to give Jessie a list of his vices, such as they were?

"He needs a lot of affection."

"I realise that," said Jessie quietly.

"If you don't mother him, he gets bitter. He's top-heavy with brain. But on the other hand, give him too much consideration and he turns selfish. A self-centred vegetable. You wouldn't want that, I'm sure."

"Listen, Sarah. I didn't set out with the deliberate intention of taking him away."

"Oh, didn't you?"

"It just happened. We were quite good friends, and then one day it just happened."

"Perhaps you'd like to explain how."

He cleared his throat and began, "Now listen, Sarah . . ." but then found he didn't know how to go on.

"I'm listening."

It finally came out in a rush. "Jessie did her best to discourage me. But it's my fault, I kept on pestering her. My fault. Not Jessie's fault. Or your fault, either."

"It's not a question of faults," said Sarah, very much in command of herself and turning to Jessie. "Now say you get him. I'm giving you every chance. Only tell me this: how are you going to keep him? He'll have left one woman in the lurch already. And we're none of us getting any younger, are we?"

"Now I've actually met you," said Jessie, icily quiet, "I begin to understand why his feelings altered. You try to dominate him."

Sarah said, "I haven't thanked you for rescuing me downstairs. Sweet of you—and so broad-minded. This, I suppose," she added, gazing round the hotel room, which at that moment looked particularly drab, "was to have been the bridal suite."

She sat higher against the pillows, glanced down at the bed's narrowness, looked at Jimmy and deliberately twisted her mouth into a grin. He was horrified to find himself automatically grinning back. They'd had a legendary fiasco in their student days on just such a narrow bed.

Jessie said, "Of course, you've every right. You're the wife, and there's your baby coming. What can I

possibly say for myself? It's up to Jimmy—he must choose."

"Yes, Jimmy," Sarah said. "It's time we heard from you."

They both looked at him expectantly.

"These things happen all the time. You're newly married. It's all a dream. But then the daydream fades and you're faced with actual reality." It shook him inwardly to hear his own muddled meaningless words booming away like the padre's confidential little talk. Yet he'd meant it to be perfectly sincere. "Nothing comes up to expectation. It all gets falser and falser. And how can you break out of it?"

Break out of it? But Jessie would put her own meaning, a quite different meaning upon his words about falseness. He said:

"A man needs a home with a certain amount of comfort. Affection."

And could Jessie cook? She was looking at him with unsmiling but encouraging eyes.

"So you want to make a break with your own past?" A sort of categorical harshness had returned to Sarah's voice, as if by putting this conflict in her own specialised political terms, she'd stand a chance of understanding it. "You intend to stop being the person once you were, critical and alive. You want to become a new person entirely, with a nice home and a little garden and a season ticket. A man with a safe job and a small car. Growing balder and duller and more insufferably smug every year."

"Well, what if I do?"

"Nothing wrong with it. Except that you're making one huge mistake. It's harder to become a vegetable than you think. You still carry your old self around with you; the recollection of your old ideas. There's no forgetting them. And so you become an unhappy vegetable. How can you ever get stupid enough to enjoy what you're planning?" Her eyes lit up; her little smile of triumph was a genuine smile. She had made an effective debating point.

"You're a very brilliant woman," said Jessie. "In that respect I could never hope to compete."

Jimmy was reminded of the way she would intervene at a meeting with some naïve and apparently sincere remark that was quite disconcerting. In some indefinable way, and even though Sarah had the sounder arguments, it was Jessie who had really scored, saying in effect, 'I would never criticise you or try to dominate you in quite her sweeping way.'

Like someone forcing herself to use violent language, Sarah announced, "You're a bitch." But she said it quietly, to herself, as if holding in check an impulse to make a real fight of it.

Jimmy almost wished they'd come to blows. Thunder and lightning exploding between them would break the oppressive, almost unbearable tension. But they were civilised. Instead of biting and scratching they were trying to hurt each other with words, to plant painful ideas inside each other that might rankle for a lifetime.

"And the father of your child," asked Sarah acidly, "I suppose he's still about the place?"

"You're not doing yourselves any good, girls," said Jimmy, "clawing at each other."

"He was killed in the war," Jessie muttered.

"In the war?" said Sarah, rhetorically, falsely. "Yet neither of you minds putting your wits to work on this new recruiting scheme? Oh, I know all about it. War. That's where you'll get the money to finance this comfort and affection you're so much looking forward to."

"Let's cut out the politics, just this once," said Jimmy wearily.

Jessie's calm, encouraging eyes were liquefying in tears. One large tear rolled down each side of her newly powdered nose.

'Soon,' thought Sarah, 'she'll look her real age for a change.'

"It's so unfair," Jessie was protesting. "I never gave it a thought."

Only after several moments did Jimmy grasp that she'd referred to Sarah's idiotic remark about the recruiting scheme.

He said, "I think you'd better go, Sarah. Providing you're well enough. This has gone quite far enough."

"I fully intend to go. I'm going home absolutely on my own."

"That's understood then."

She had got off the bed and was walking towards the door as if every step hurt her inwardly. Over her shoulder she said in a strangled voice, "You can both stay. You can do what you like."

Because of her politics and that woman's deliberate

artful tears she had lost him now. Tears were the weapons of weakness. But she couldn't and wouldn't cry, though the effort of leaving him like this tore at her, body and mind.

Half-heartedly following her to the door he heard her mutter, "It's so degrading."

"But, Sarah——"

But she never waited to hear him. The door clicked shut behind her. She had gone. She was going home by herself to that hateful box-like semi-detached house. Would she have enough money to pay the cab? He stifled a sudden impulse to run after her and give her some change.

Jessie was straightening the coverlet on the one bed, and punching the pillow, as if obliterating all signs that Sarah had been there. Then she sat on the other bed and swung her plump legs up.

He went and sat there, reluctantly, leaning his weight on one hand and looking at her.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" she said, surprisingly.

Evidently she knew he felt knocked about and beastly; and she felt the same. She was offering him what he'd asked for: comfort and affection.

Her face was lined and tear-stained, but her mouth was soft. It started as a gentle motherly kiss, and then they held each other closer until they found themselves facing on the narrow bed, clinging together desperately. Then the intensely close moment of the kiss was over. They held each other gently, and lay relaxed.

"Well?" she said.

The angry tones and bitter expressions of the argument were already fading out of his mind. He thought, 'I ought to feel ashamed of myself.' But the idea had no intensity; he was merely informing himself what he ought to feel.

With the quick natural felicity of a cat she wriggled into a more comfortable posture.

"You remember what she said about the war?" Sarah had become 'she'—the hostile and anonymous force on the other side of the nursery door. Without premeditation—with a kind of instinctive cunning—Jessie was wrapping him close to her as if in a conspiracy. "It made me understand how I feel for you."

This was the first time she had ever directly admitted, much less set out to analyse, a 'feeling for' him.

He said nothing. To draw out her inner emotions and thoughts was something he had never thought possible. Yet buried under all that animal feeling and sweetness of nature there must be actual thoughts that could be put into words.

"You attracted me at first because I thought you reminded me of him. Tony's father. I mean, you were a pilot, too. Sometimes you talk the slang—did you know? But in all the little ways he was so different. I began to remember him more clearly, and make comparison. I'd forgotten how mean and cruel he could be sometimes. In the war, with so little time it didn't seem to matter."

"Go on."

"That new scheme. I mean—she was just trying to hurt us, wasn't she?"

"She believes it herself. But that doesn't mean it's true."

Yet bringing up this subject—Sarah's political parting shot—had broken the mood. He began to feel restless. His foot was developing pins and needles.

Now Jessie was saying, "Couldn't we get out of advertising and go away somewhere? Australia? You could teach. We'd have each other. We wouldn't need so very much money."

His hand round her shoulder pulled her closer towards him. Softly he said, "Going away won't alter things."

"It would be different."

He started to say softly, "One job may be a little less dirty than another. But not much, because for people like us who mess about with ideas, all jobs are more or less dirty. The problem is how to do a dirty job without being personally corrupted."

"You're not religious, are you?" she said with alarm.

"No."

"I don't follow you," she said. "It sounds impossible."

He tried to find her mouth and shut it with a kiss. a deliberate unfeeling seducer's kiss that would occupy his attention, so that he wouldn't have to admit that what she said was probably true.

"If we're going on much longer," she said, "I want to undress."

"Are we?"

"Do you want to?"

"Of course."

He'd be a fool to refuse her. She was kindness and affection amidst the dirtiness; the heart of his heartless world.

She moved away from him, put her shoes neatly under the bed, started to roll down her stockings. It was all so tidy and matter-of-fact. "If you want to, then I want to."

Yet he wished he'd said no. This would be beastly and incongruous—his mind utterly at odds with what she was expecting of him. But having pretended it was too late to retract: like stepping on a long slide and letting go, then regretting it a moment later.

He said, "Jessie."

"Yes?"

"You don't really want to, do you?" She had nothing on now but her vest. She was plumper than he realised. Hesitation, perplexity, fear of losing him were mingled and warring in her face. Then she broke into a real loving smile.

"No," she said. "But I felt I ought to. Like a wife, you know."

"I know. But we must never be like that." He felt a strange lightening of his heart; an extraordinary relief.

She came over and sat beside him; even a little shyly. "I'm cold."

He kissed her shoulder—plump, soft, perfumed.

"Get into bed then." The hoarseness in his voice surprised him.

"No," she said, "no."

There is something strange about nakedness, as if by removing clothes one changes the personality. There may still be an element of pretence and deceit, but it's different and unhidden. She was like a different person, she uttered a third no, but quite helplessly. She clung to him, and he found she was crying wetly and silently as she had when Sarah was in the room. Her tears were warm on his shoulder, and then they were cold.

He thought to himself, "This is impossible," and then found he had actually said the words aloud.

She said, "Hold me."

Instead of their bodies melting together, as they had during the kiss, her body felt separate and distinct from his, an antagonist, an object of lust.

Then she had moved around, plumply. She pushed tears out of her eyes with her knuckles, and was looking up at him.

"In my handbag," she said, with a queer little smile. "Cigarettes."

He could have laughed with relief. There was the impossibly narrow bed, and his mind was still tender from the quarrel between the two women.

He lit her cigarette and pushed it gently between her open lips, and found a clean glass ash-tray to put on the low table between the beds.

"All we need now is the usual cup of coffee," he said.

"Is this all we're good for—smoking and talking?" She leaned towards him as she asked the question, and he almost kissed her, but suddenly interpreted the triumphant smile on her mouth. She was calming him down. She was in fact seducing him. Loving to her was terribly important; she was obviously sure that once they had done it together, he would never leave her.

She was probably right. He kissed the soft, smoke-tasting mouth, with its message of pleasure. She could enslave him with pleasure and affection and comfort.

The kiss came to an end. Still looking at him, she reached out a hand to crush her burning cigarette stub. She was sure of him; too sure. She spoke the next words quickly. "I'm not too old, you know."

"Too old?"

"To have another baby."

It was so fantastically irrelevant. He said, "So you really think I want a child?"

"Men do, don't they?" she asked. "A son?"

Then, "What have I said?"

Then, "Did I say something wrong? What are you doing? Come back to bed!"

"I nearly did something wicked."

? "It's not wicked. It's natural."

He was choking silently, unable to speak. At last he said, "There's no other word for it. Wicked."

"Come back here. Let me hold you." Nice

Then she was beside him on the carpet. naked, absurdly plump and naked, reaching out for his

shoulders. But it was different out of bed, colder, less intimate, more ridiculous.

"Let go of me," he told her. "I must dress."

"Don't you love me?"

"I don't want to hurt you. I don't wish you anything but good. But I feel so ashamed."

◀ "We might always be together. You could have done anything you wanted. You can still." ? *as a result*

"Whether I go or stay you must think me filthy and heartless."

"No."

"Not even if I go? I must have time to think."

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands resting on her knees so easily, so sweetly, that he could hardly bear not to go back and ask her forgiveness. She said, "I didn't mean have a baby to trap you. I meant, have one if we wanted. A fair decision."

"You're too good a woman for me, Jessie."

"No, I'm not. I've been more wicked than you'll ever be."

"Let me think things over."

"Are you really going?" Chagrin, almost anguish, was in this last question. As if, whatever spasm of guilt he might first pass through, she was sure he would finally return to her on the bed. "You're not going?"

He was beside her, half clad, holding her to him with much more real love than he could ever have felt had they expertly and artificially slept together. She was stroking his hair.

"Jessie, try to understand. I must go, I've got to.

I just can't bear myself. But you mustn't feel insulted, my dear."

"I'm not insulted," she said softly. "Just bewildered. And disappointed, too—at one part I really wanted to, myself." She said that regretfully, as if it was a rare thing.

Again the secure, comfortable feeling of pleasure came up like a wave.

"I must, must go," he said gently, detaching himself.

There was a long silence.

He'd been trying unsuccessfully to get his stiff collar on. She said, "You can't find the stud at the back because it's not there."

She said, "It's mostly the thought of the baby, isn't it, that worries you?"

"Not only the baby."

"Remember how you kept on at me, week after week? I discovered I was fond of you a long time before I let you see it."

He turned round from the dressing-table. It had to be said, sooner or later. Maybe this was the time.

"You went out with Neill. Was that after you realised you were fond of me? Or before?"

Soberly she told him, "I'm a free woman, dear. He's only a boy. I wanted to test my feelings. I'm not saying I'm a good woman. But I try to be fair. Now you be fair."

"It's all false," he said quietly. "It's a dirty shifting world, like a nightmare. At least I never felt like that with Sarah. It just tormented me to know she be-

lieved in something, even though it might be something absurd. All the time I felt this contrast."

"I'm in the same business as you are," she said, "with much the same friends, and the same ideas. Does that mean I'm false and dirty too?"

"Well, does it?" he asked imperatively. "Does it?"

"I didn't feel bad about this new scheme until tonight. But now I've begun to wonder."

It was like throwing something vile from you with all your force, only to have it come back and hit you full in the face.

"Hell!" he said. "Hell!"

With his raincoat over his arm he opened the door.

"You can't go like that," she said weakly, imploringly, "without a collar and tie."

If only you could get rid of every problem by opening and shutting a door.

Perhaps she'd hate him now for this—a hatred as intense as her love. How could they bear to look each other in the face tomorrow morning?

In the entrance of the hotel, someone from IAS noticed him looking collarless and distraught, and said, "Oh, Jimmy, you owe me a pound. I put Mrs. James into a taxi half an hour ago. I hope I did right?"

"Yes," he said, "yes."

He walked out and found the streets were wet with rain. He buttoned his raincoat up to the neck, and started walking. His brain was tender like a limb that had recently been banged against a sharp corner. He couldn't bear to exercise it in thought until the high

wave of his feelings had dropped away, because any sort of thinking hurt.

After a while, hot inside his coat and with his hair wet, he started deliberately to consider the thing abstractedly, objectively. The pubs were still open, but he couldn't face even the trivial human contact of ordering a drink. He didn't want to drink—that was no solution. He wanted to know what to do.

Love wasn't everything. You had to earn a living. In choosing a woman to love you seemed to have a choice, a certain measure of freedom. But in choosing the people you worked with and the things you did for a living there was actually no choice at all, and that very compulsion robbed love too of its apparent freedom.

Yet life in the agency was funny and provocative and stimulating. The hardest thing in the world to explain to outsiders was how intense could be the excitement and earnestness, and despair even, around a few words in a silly advertisement over which the layman's eye flickered for a mere moment as he turned the page. Maybe you got home sucked dry and past caring. But while it was happening it was exciting. You were in touch—or almost in touch—with big money and big business. Because people had money to spend they were often liberal in their attitudes. And at the back of one's mind there was an illogical but powerful argument: something they pay so much for must be worthwhile.

And while any given advertisement was being conjured up, nobody really thought of it as a lie.

There were laws to ensure the facts were right, and codes of conduct drawn up to make sure the slant was only slanted, not crooked. And in the last analysis almost every advertisement was socially necessary. How else could one shift the vast production of modern factories—the tons of soap and billions of cigarettes? Given the price mechanism, given the market?

Only it was heartless.

Because your business involved playing irresponsibly with words and ideas, you also started playing with people. The human beings you worked with became either characters in a phantasmagoria of persecution and vindictiveness; or competitors in a rat-race for power, which when you'd got it was not really power at all, but only a more elaborate kind of worry.

But hell! Other people with filthy jobs brought their kids up decently, didn't they, without needing their environment deodorised? What's the odds? Every door you open leads to a trap, only some traps are slightly more plush-lined than others.

This love affair had made his feelings begin to flow, after the pains he had taken to congeal them. It had got him thinking seriously for the first time about his child. One's own flesh and blood. Something separate and distinct, and yet you. A bawling, snivelling, laughing, questioning creature that the pair of you made inadvertently by going to bed together from pleasure or habit. But now it crouched there like a bomb. Sarah carried it around like a hostage he had given her.

The incredible thing women would do for their children! Jessie, for instance. Yes, in an odd, infatuated, persistent way he had pestered her. But when she finally declared her love for him, it was obviously love coloured and intensified by anxiety for her fatherless child.

As street merged into street and the rain ended, he began to wonder about the people at work, and their children. Lorimer, though he seemed a typical family man, had no family at all. John and Gertie Cox had a boy of about ten—he wore spectacles and looked nervous. The convention at IAS was to grumble about the kids—the noise and the bills and the school fees—but sometimes to be boastful or sentimental about them. One or two men kept a family photograph on the desk, as if to remind them why they were doing it day after day. Or maybe to create a good solid reliable impression with clients.

But did they ever stop to think how remarkable and responsible the whole process was? Probably not. They dragged around with them a mass of habits and prejudices dimly mirroring the way they themselves had been brought up. And if they weren't very careful they infected their children in turn with the same combination of useless ideas and fatuous attitudes. Maybe that was why Sarah's parents had sent her to that crazy school, where everyone swore and fornicated even from the word go, and yet ended with characters as firm as the Rock of Gibraltar.

For himself, it was different. He'd been brought up in a back street of small houses. All through the

slump the curtains were changed and the knockers were polished, even though the people inside might be slowly starving to death, as indeed some of them were, by courtesy of the UAB and the PAC. Those initials are meaningless now, but then in the depression years they haunted the street from end to end.

If you didn't attend to your job you might sink to that level—the newspaper-tablecloth, the pawnshop-and-dole level. You put a bit by at the end of the week and spent sleepless nights dreading what might happen when there was nothing coming in.

But then, on the other hand, if you did your job far too well, and ended up a scholarship boy and an Air Force officer and a graduate, what a cock-eyed world you found yourself in!

The old prohibitions and incentives didn't work any more. The love of the snug family, the fear of the neighbours' opinions, the dread of poverty. But what could you put in their place? You can't expect other people to tell you the right ideas to live by. Every man must work them out for himself. But then on consideration that thought didn't reassure him, either. He could all but hear his dead father making a similar pronouncement—a man who'd never had an original idea or done a morally courageous thing in his life.

He wanted to go home to her, beg her forgiveness too. He'd go down on his knees to her if necessary. Try to explain what he newly felt about the baby: the new serious feeling that made IAS and all it im-

plied seem suddenly futile, and even to some extent wicked.

But two lamp-posts farther along the road, and his nerve had failed. He began to react like a business man again. He thought, 'I'll ring her up. So it won't have to be said face to face. Sensible, too. Why go all the way home and find maybe she hadn't gone there?'

The trouble with telephones is that the party at each end of the wire is able to ring off at will. It's not a fully human means of communication, where speakers have to live through the consequences of their words. It's a business man's device for cutting short awkward questions.

There was a buzz . . . buzz . . . Then a travesty of her voice saying, "Hello?"

"Sarah. So you got home safely."

"Obviously."

"Look—I'm terribly sorry."

"Yes?"

"It's all so complicated . . ."

"What did you say?"

"I said complicated."

He heard a shriek at the other end. It could have been the opening of a fit of hysterics. Then a bang in his ear as she slapped the receiver down.

The night seemed full of weeping women; and what's more objectionable than weeping women? The phone call had brought him emotionally to the surface; to the usual, superficial way of looking at things. In the mood of the moment he might even have gone back to the hotel ballroom and got a little

dancing in before they played 'Auld Lang Syne'. But he remembered that under his mackintosh he was wearing no collar and tie. He'd look absurd—disreputable.

He stood under a street lamp to check that he had enough money in his wallet, then hailed and caught a solitary cab splashing through the quiet, dark streets on its way back from a theatre fare.

He had his latch key but she'd bolted the front door—demonstrative but rather idiotic because the back door as always was unlocked and unbolted.

Quietly he hung his raincoat over a chair in the kitchen. But going towards the stairs he tripped over the turned-up corner of the hall carpet. That warned her.

Her bedside lamp was lit. She was on the carpet, halfway buttoned into his old service greatcoat. She hadn't been able to find her own dressing-gown, so as usual she'd taken his. It was another of the little things that so much irritated him.

"I hardly thought you'd dare." Her eyes were red as if she'd been crying; something that he could never remember happening before.

And here she was, wrapping herself, covering up her night-gown like a woman surprised by the lodger. It made him notice her figure for the first time in a long while; the baby was making her just a bit thick round the middle and protuberant in the bust. But her body was erect and strong, like the body of a

country woman; the new weight made her look handsome and dignified.

As he came close she moved abruptly away. "Don't touch me."

His wife was evidently now in the category of typists and other such women—however provocative they look, you mustn't touch them.

"What a mess it all is." He noticed there was no contrition in his voice. He spoke as if he expected her to sympathise.

"Where's your sense of decency?" she asked quietly.

"Maybe I haven't got one."

He sat down on a low bedside chair and then in the silence that followed he gradually slumped forward from his erect position, and put his head in his hands as though its weight were rather too much to bear.

She had never seen him look so defeated before. She couldn't help feeling sorry for him. It took a real effort not to reach out and touch his shoulder encouragingly.

He thought bitterly: 'For her there's no difficulty; right and wrong; love and hate. You love your husband and children; and hate—well, once it was Hitler, and now it is probably McCarthy and Chiang Kai-shek.' But though her arguments were trite and easy to show up for fallacies, the feelings they prompted in her were genuine and ran at full tide.

"After what I saw tonight," she said in a low voice, "every nice memory I have of you will be tainted and horrible."

But he thought, 'Nice memory? What does she

mean exactly, nice memory?' He said, "I did come back to you, Sarah."

"Like an alley cat after a night out." She was abusive; that meant she was softening a little. "And what's her name? Jessie?"

"That's all finished."

"Oh."

"I'm not going back."

"I suppose you began by making all sorts of romantic promises to her. I suppose you led her on."

"Very likely I did."

"And then you realise you deceived her. You cheated her."

"Not intentionally. It was a strange feeling; very sudden."

"And you don't feel it any more?" There was pathos in the quick eagerness.

"Once a thing like that starts you can't stop it."

"What do you mean?"

"I began thinking about the baby, feeling for it now in the same way I felt for Jessie. And for you too, I suppose."

"There's no need to tack me on as an after-thought," she said curtly. "I'll make sure the baby's well looked after. I can earn my own living. Thank God."

"You seem to forget it's our baby."

"You've apparently forgotten that yourself of late," she said bitterly. But she knew he had scored a point there. She wanted to stand up and hold herself across the breast with crossed arms and say, 'It's my baby, my

baby. No man shall tamper with it. I'm going to bring it up to know the truth and stand up for the right and be afraid of nothing.'

The baby would compensate for all his shortcomings. The baby would be a son with none of his father's arrogant masculine defects of character.

"Our baby," he reiterated. "You say you're a Communist. Well, this is one thing we have in common."

She sat silently until he could hardly bear it.

Then she started unbuttoning the overcoat. "Take this—it's yours," she said slowly. "I put it on without noticing."

"What does it matter?" he said. Then he risked another phrase, more explicit, closer to the point. "What's mine is yours."

"Is it? I suppose it is."

His left hand was on the opulent curve where her hip came away from her waist. But before his right with unthinking familiarity could take her shoulder and pull her lips towards him, she unhitched his hand and let it fall. Yet she didn't speak or even look at him. He remembered her checking him in the same cold way, the first time they'd ever gone out together, as students.

"First, there are one or two things to settle." He sat there, waiting, his heart turning to stone.

"Have you come to an understanding with her? That woman? Jessie?"

"Not exactly."

"I suppose you left her in tears." A moment's silence. "Oh, you men," she said, exasperated.

He made a half-apologetic grunting noise.

"You'll have to see her and explain. You realise the position she's in? So you'd better tell her. If possible, without getting entangled again." Catching sight of his face she said, "You dreading it?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's got to be done. Personally I'd rather you never saw her again. But that's too difficult, isn't it?"

"Anything else?"

"One of you will have to get another job. Or in no time it will start up again."

"How can I possibly ask her that? Making a move is so tricky—particularly if you're a woman."

"What's wrong with you getting another job?"

"Oh."

"I'm not telling you to do it. I'm not even asking you to do it. But frankly, don't you think it's best?"

"Do you mind if I undress? It's been a long day."

"You don't suppose I'm having you in bed fully clothed, do you?"

When he came back from the bathroom, smelling of soap instead of Jessie's embrace, she herself had gone back to bed. She was reading one of his thrillers, as if this were the same as any other night, and nothing extraordinary had happened.

"Finding a new job won't be so easy," he said.

"What's a little temporary hardship?" She smiled amicably. "Might even be good for us."

"So you think it's essential?"

Putting the book face downwards on the coverlet but grooving in her finger to mark the place she said,

"What's so very wonderful about working for Lorimer? First you won't stand up to him over the recruiting scheme, though it's politically immoral. And even now that your marriage is involved you wonder about risking it. I don't understand."

"Like everything else. It grows on you."

"You mean you like it?"

"I suppose so."

"How can you possibly? It's so trivial. Useless."

Suddenly he realised, but had sense enough not to say. Some other time she might grasp it, but not now. He liked his job *because* it was trivial and useless.

Why not glory in the stimulating futility? The storm of fatuous passion over a phrase to advertise a biscuit or a pair of socks, the hectic, expensive excitement over pure parasitism, sheer wastefulness. He was deliberately wasting himself away on the job, even though he had now begun to realise his genuine feeling might thereby dwindle like a river sinking into the sand.

Any other job but this would oblige him to take life 'seriously' with the awful flatulent seriousness of a minor civil servant or an assistant lecturer at a provincial university. If you're going to be bogus, be thorough about it.

A last flicker of long-buried social consciousness suggested this argument: 'they' fix it like this because if sociology weren't smothered in cotton wool it would blow the top off everything. But who the hell, when you came to think of it, were 'they'?

"I'll give in my notice tomorrow." Was that his voice?

"Or after Christmas," she conceded. "And how will you put it to them?"

"I'll say the recruiting campaign was one too many. Might as well end with a bang."

Turning towards him smiling, her glossy-covered thriller gradually slid across the quilt and fell to the floor. She let it fall.

"You really mean that?"

"Never more serious in my life." He had a quiet inward feeling that whatever other lies had been spoken tonight, this anyway was the truth. But would that private calmness last long enough to see him through?

The firm's party was planned to break up in time for people to catch their last trains and buses to the outer suburbs. The few who weren't satisfied with that much merriment went on to spur-of-the-moment parties at different people's flats. The drinkers in the bar ordered compulsory sandwiches and settled down to a last half-hour of quick tippling.

Jessie stayed miserably in the hotel bedroom because she couldn't face the alternative of going home to her sister's mocking cross-examination. The thought of going on to someone's impromptu party was even beastlier still.

Why had everything failed? It wasn't just his wife's arrival. At some point which neither would now be

able to discover or return to, it had started going hopelessly wrong.

And as she bitterly recalled, time after time it had been rather like this. When she for her part was ready to give a man affection, love, abundant love, someone who wanted and maybe needed to take her love had nothing to give in return. At the worst they sponged on her—for a thrill, or affection, or even hard cash—but as soon as she wanted something in return they were cold or went away.

One couldn't help loving Jimmy all the better for going back to his wife. Under all the puzzling cleverness he was evidently a good man. Though realising that made loving him even worse.

'I've failed,' she told herself. 'Something in the world has turned against my sort of love. Soon I shall be an old woman, with no man to look at me.'

She went across to the bedroom's triple mirror to repair her face and get some sleeping tablets from her handbag. She took two and drank some water from the tooth-glass, though usually it was only safe to take one of that sort. Soon she felt sleepy, and lay in the bed with her face newly made up and the sheet up to her chin, with her eyes calmly closed like someone who has quietly died with the faint, faraway sound of dance music in her ears.

Before the last dance, Neill and the superbly beautiful receptionist left together.

"I can't endure 'Auld Lang Syne'."

He was going to say he too thought it was jolly hackneyed when she added, "It's so sad—I want to cry."

"I've got my car," he announced, "in Russell Square."

That nearly made a little poem. I've got my car in Russell Squar. I've got my care in Russell Square.

"Good," she said, poutingly forming her beautiful lips round the syllable as though she were tasting its flavour. "We can drive down to Chelsea and look at the river."

Tapping his coat pocket he said, "I've got a bottle." Why the hell look at the river?

"If you're going to drive you mustn't drink," she said didactically.

Smack, smack, smack went the sports-car tyres along wet Tottenham Court Road.

Above their heads were neon lights, flashing monotonously as if created by a slipshod miracle worker in the cheapest possible fire.

"Our handiwork," he said, pointing a minatory finger skyward.

"Marvellous," she said, snuggling down. "I want twenty thousand pounds."

"What for?" (As if he couldn't guess.)

"Live in the Azores. Swim in the sea all the year round."

"You like swimming?"

"And skiing." As if that was the only other thing on God's earth she really liked. "Good snow in the Azores?"

"Dunno."

Like someone stating a fact as plain as the nose on his face she burst out, "You haven't been there, have you?"

She shook loose her soft golden hair with a pretty gesture and released a faint cloud of expensive perfume, which struggled with the petrol fumes for a moment and then succumbed.

"With twenty thousand pounds," he said, trying to make himself sound the right sort of chap, "I'd buy a small yacht and sail it round the world."

"Oh, do shut up about your filthy money."

She blew her nose vigorously on a microscopic handkerchief like a woman with a secret sorrow. Poverty was breaking her heart. Or maybe the sadness of drink, for eddying in the wake of that expensive perfume was an exhalation of gin.

Then all at once she cried, "Stop! Stop!"

They were going down the Mall in the general direction of Victoria. He reached down to the floor and pulled desperately on the handbrake.

But it wasn't after all a dire emergency. Her voice was now lyrically calm.

"Look at the lights."

In the night around them there was a quantity of lights in a large variety of colours. The particular ones she meant were on the upper floors of Buckingham Palace.

"I wonder what they're doing?" she said, in accents of religious awe.

He nearly replied, "Cleaning their teeth?" but

that might have sounded disrespectful. "Having a nightcap?"

"Aren't they marvellous!" She was folding her long hands together like a suppliant in a Renaissance altar piece. He found it hard to believe that people actually still did that with their hands, spontaneously. Perhaps they taught it in finishing schools.

"Marvellous," he agreed.

She bent her head towards him so that her loose hair tickled his cheek.

"Drive on—I feel better now. Stop opposite Cheyne Walk."

"Any particular reason?"

"The flat's near-by."

Flat, huh?

He parked where they could see the stranded houseboats and glittering river water.

He got out his bottle and the little silver folding cup.

"Let's have our own nightcap."

He popped the silver cup open like a tiny opera hat. She took it and held it steady.

"It's vodka," he said. "Drink it down at one go."

But she was handing back the cup. He almost poured the vodka on her knees. In the nick of time he realised why. "Polish vodka," he emphasised. "Czarist vodka. Reactionary vodka."

"Russian would choke me."

It did choke her, none the less.

"A couple clinches it," he said, as he handed her a clean white handkerchief to wipe away the tears.

She looked misty-eyed at the refilled cup. "Shouldn't that be yours?"

Solemnly he reminded her, "I've got to drive."

She tossed it down, and threw the silver cup on to the back seat.

"So warm," she said, undoing the big button at the top of her coat. "Like swimming in the Azores."

The crown of her head made a nice handful as he moved her around to face him.

Everything was working out perfectly. 'I ought to feel happy,' he thought, 'here in the middle of London with a beautiful girl in my arms.' He shut his eyes and began to concentrate on the pleasant sensations. She too was concentrating on the pleasant sensations. It was a to-and-fro like a very fast and exciting game of tennis.

Then all at once she shuddered like a car braked much too suddenly. She moved far enough away to button herself up. "It's late," she said. "I must go in."

"I'll come too." He dodged around and opened the door on her side. Out uninhibitedly came those long elegant legs.

"Yes, do," she said. "Mummy's waiting up with sandwiches. She likes to see company."

They went out arm-in-arm across the road to Cheyne Walk. There was nothing more to it now. He was feeling excruciatingly bored; he felt like a cake that's failed in the oven.

Under the arch of the front door he said, as if he had just remembered, "My mummy's waiting up for me, too."

"How nice," she said, letting herself in with a latch key so quickly he hadn't even time to squeeze her hand.

She was like an ornamental animal with not too much brain. Or a slot machine—you put in a penny and got out a half-way witty answer. Was there more to their embrace than the lipstick left on his mouth?

Was there really a real her? He looked at a small oblong offcut of his own face in the driving mirror. If it came to that, take away the audience and was there any real him? He felt, for a moment, exceedingly profound.

Backing the car, he began driving along the wrong side of the Embankment, until it dawned on him. Then he tore at the wheel melodramatically as though the traffic island he had to avoid to reach the proper side were a mortal enemy, standing there ready to spring.

Lorimer and his wife had booked a room at the hotel too, so if Jimmy had stayed the night they would all have met over the toast and marmalade.

Lorimer was one of those uncomfortable people who are brisk and talkative at breakfast. When Jessie came into the dining-room rather dazed, he signalled her jovially to come and make a third at his table.

Drawing his own conclusions from the black hollows under Jessie's eyes and her languid, dislocated air, he treated her like a woman with a hangover. Gave her black coffee when she wanted white; offered to brow-

beat the management into fetching her a bottle of Bass, since there's nothing better next morning than a hair of the dog that bit you. But his camaraderie was just a way of showing his inner disapproval. Self-indulgence: it led to tragic cases like the premature old men with bottle noses and rubber collars you find selling matches in the gutter.

But the offer of Bass made a hole through her narcotic blur, and she saw daylight.

"Because I couldn't sleep last night," she said, "I took a pill. It must have been terribly strong."

"Often Mr. Lorimer doesn't sleep," said Mrs. Lorimer with chatty tactlessness. "He won't take anything, not even aspirin."

"I do sympathise," said Jessie, looking hard at him as if to remind him how a couple of days before he'd sent his secretary to borrow her aspirin. Though it was a trifling happening, he remembered too, and his expression changed from rather smug to slightly guilty.

"Like the party?" he asked her, but didn't wait for her answer. For of course she'd liked the party. It cost the Board a good deal of money. There was the ball-room and the champagne and the catering generally, not to mention the band. But it was worth every penny of it to break down barriers and make everybody better friends.

"It's a thoroughly good thing. We come out of our separate offices and join together on the dance floor. The tensions and rivalries don't seem so important any more. The class distinction is gone. Not that

there is much class distinction at IAS, as I think you will agree."

"Oh, I do."

"Everyone feeling happy and friendly and relaxed. If only people could be like that always."

"Wouldn't it be nice."

"The marmalade," whispered Mrs. Lorimer. He'd kept the chromium-plated pot clutched in his left hand, like an orb to match the sceptre of his spoon. "But they can't, because business has its other side, too." His voice dropped sepulchrally at the word "other".

"I do hope you slept well," said Jessie, who was still thinking of that borrowed aspirin. What frauds men were to their wives!

"Not a wink," confided Mrs. Lorimer on his behalf.

Sternly he announced, "I spent a long while thinking."

"Yes?" Jessie looked at him, open-eyed, as if sincerely waiting for something very important to be said. Merely by looking at her face he felt better.

"We go to the War House this afternoon. I was cogitating about how and where we stand."

The War House? The War House? Jessie hadn't the faintest idea. But she didn't ask, and that was just as well, because a 'Confidential Inner Office Memorandum' signed by Lorimer himself had reached her desk the previous day. It hinted at this meeting in such a discreetly ambiguous way that anyone casually glancing at it would know right away there was a mystery worth ferretting. But it stayed

in her in tray unread, because when Jimmy had been so rude to her on the phone she'd been too upset to work systematically through her papers and leave her desk clear. That in itself was something that had practically never happened before.

CHAPTER NINE

They met again in the cab that was taking them to the War Office. Four of them—Lorimer, Jessie, Monk and Jimmy James.

Lorimer and Jessie had the back seat, and Monk and Jimmy faced them on the little spring-up seats that look through the rear window and feel so insecure. Jimmy and Jessie were facing each other, their knees almost touching. They couldn't avoid each other. A feminine smell filled the cab, oppressive and dominating. But she had a dazed look still in her eyes.

She carried a folder of papers. She'd worked hard since nine to get the papers ready for the meeting. Now she sat there, trying to keep the main points fixed firm in a head that was still muddled with sleeping pills. This was no time to be distracted by any awful bitterness. Yet he was sitting there right opposite her. She was only made of flesh and blood, not a block of stone. Didn't he realise that?

Cyril Monk was trying to contract his muscles so as to occupy the least possible space. This was something he'd first started to do at school, because of a dreaded master who in his rages would hurl bits of chalk at the boys. If you ducked or flinched he would pick you for his next target. So Monk had worked out

this trick of making his muscles taut, and so practically disappearing into himself. He'd used it in every big crisis, like the tribunal and the day the baby died; and even in relatively little ones, like staring across the breakfast table this morning at his wife's hair and outraged face, and acting as if it all hadn't happened.

The War Office—or, as Lorimer called it, the War House—would be another minor ordeal. The stone lair of the military beast.

The commissionaire at the door was curtly respectful. He had the erect, self-contained manner of an old soldier, probably a sergeant-major. Though he was polite enough to his obvious superiors, no doubt he'd been a petty tyrant in his day. Monk felt a chill at his heart.

Lorimer's manner too was subtly changing. He was reacting to the vaguely Army environment, growing visibly younger and more alert in his manner, yet somehow more respectful. When the uniformed man with red tabs on his lapels came unexpectedly into their waiting-room, no one would have been surprised had Lorimer snapped him off a crisp salute.

But one straight look at the newcomer's face gave him away. He had horn-rimmed glasses and a small hesitant chin, and his moustache was fluffy. Their own sort, but in fancy dress. A propagandist, one of the boys who had found a soft billet in war and stuck there through the days of alleged peace.

He clapped Lorimer most disrespectfully on the

shoulder. "Ah—Fred. Good to see you. What have you done with that old blackguard Cox?"

Lorimer opened his mouth with a suave excuse. But this improbable colonel broke in, "Phoned to say he had a hangover. Firm's party! What a sink of iniquity your place must be!"

A stubborn but self-controlled look came over Lorimer's face. He'd just been hit on one of his tender spots. For IAS wasn't a sink of iniquity. IAS was a team of bright and loyal people who got on well together and did a good and necessary job of work.

They were led along a corridor down which men in khaki uniform and civilian clerks and grizzled veterans acting as messengers went briskly to and fro, like walking-on parts in a big musical comedy.

"You're seeing the Old Man," said the officer importantly. That turned out to be a brigadier, intelligent-looking but a real hard-bitten soldier. His office was high in the building, on a minor corridor where the bigger rooms had been divided by hardboard into small cubicles. From either side of the badly fitting partitions came the subdued muttering of two parallel conversations. Jimmy James wondered idly whether his unseen neighbours were discussing vital and priceless secrets of defence. Probably not.

The six of them were a tight fit in this little office. The colonel with horn-rimmed glasses was very deferential to the brigadier. One got the impression they were a 'team'. Horn-rims knew how to get it done competently, and the brigadier, once it was in black and white, knew how to get it accepted

by the professional soldiers who ran this place.

"Where's Cox?" snapped the brigadier.

"This is Mr. Lorimer," said Horn-rims in a quite different, more peremptory tone from the one he'd used in the waiting-room. "He's managing director of the firm which employs Cox."

"Good," said the brigadier. He went through a clip of papers on his neat desk with the fingers-all-thumbs manner of a bluff outdoor man who doesn't pretend to be an expert paper shuffler.

"Got a letter from you here." He held it up to the light of the sash window, vertically divided by partitions, which he shared with the office next door. He put it down again like a man who has prudently checked his position by a quick look at the map.

"The answer is no."

Then Lorimer did a quite unexpected thing. He stood up, pushing back his chair, reaching towards the regulation-issue civil-service hat-stand for his hat, which had only just been taken from him and hung there.

"If that's your answer, there's nothing to discuss. So good afternoon."

The brigadier was flabbergasted. Lorimer admitted afterwards to Jimmy James that he'd wondered if it would work; then quickly gave his bluff a moral gloss by saying, "But I wasn't having them treat IAS like that. They're public servants. It's public money they're spending."

Horn-rims rose to the occasion. "But wait. Let me take your hat again. I'm sure we can find a way you

can help us." Then he looked hard at Lorimer as if to say, 'Now lob the ball back to me!'

The brigadier grunted. It might have meant anything.

"I'll state my agency's position," said Lorimer, sitting down again, and using a confident bass voice that implied his agency was on nodding terms with multimillionaires and Cabinet Ministers.

"We've studied your brief most carefully. No doubt if you look you'll find certain people ready to work to such a brief. But not us. We'd be foolish to try. Because it doesn't match up with the facts as we know them."

Jimmy James was trying hard to be passionately interested in everything that was done and said. That way he could forget partially that Jessie was sitting so near. But it was all like watching a bad film on a wet day.

The brigadier had now begun to look hopefully restive, like a man who enjoys a good fight.

"I approved that brief myself," he said maliciously. "It was written to my instructions."

"You look like a man who appreciates plain speaking," said Lorimer. "I hope you realise this. It would be so easy for us to take your present brief, and produce advertisements that might humbug both you and the general public. For a time we might all get away with it. But we don't do business like that. For a simple reason. If we did, you or your successor would be dissatisfied. And with every reason."

"Strictly speaking I've no business taking any part

at all in this conversation," said the brigadier. His successor? What the devil did the fellow mean? "However, in view of your letter I thought the civil thing was to have you here and say no to your face. But now you interest me. Carry on talking."

The colonel added softly, "Officially you're not speaking to us, and officially we're not listening. This is merely an exchange of views among experts who happen to be friends."

Lorimer felt now as he always did at just this moment in a deal, even a small one: tight around the collar, and his heart beating loud enough to be heard faintly as a background to his own words.

The brigadier was evidently a king-pin. Talking to the man who made the actual decisions was uncommon when doing business with the Government. Now he would be frank and blunt and public spirited.

"Your brief is based on guesswork. You take for granted a number of views that have been held so long that no one questions them. But the facts don't actually support them."

He made a tiny gesture, and Jimmy, knowing this was his cue, laid his own folder of research information on the brigadier's desk.

"The facts as my chaps see them," said Lorimer, tapping the folder, "are in here. You'll want time to study them, so I'll leave them with you. They imply advertising that is a radical departure——"

Monk with the rough layouts of the 'Peace' campaign under his arm was aching for the limelight. He could be persuasive too. Would he get the chance?

But the brigadier held up his hand. "Let me make one thing clear. At this stage I have no wish to examine any part of your proposed advertising campaign. Submit it at the proper time in the proper way. If it doesn't match up with my brief, well, that's a chance you're taking. The single thing that interests me—mildly—are those figures on the table."

He rang for a messenger. They all sat in silence while the four of them from IAS looked reverently at the folder on the desk, as if they could hardly bear to part with it, and the brigadier turned up one edge with his fingers as if he could hardly bear to wait before reading it. The colonel was smiling like a cat who has been at the cream. No one was taken in a bit by all this play-acting.

"Show the lady and these gentlemen out."

Through the closed, glass-panelled door, Lorimer heard the colonel say diplomatically, not too flatteringly, "Clever!" and the brigadier reply, "We can use clever people."

He took them to a club off Northumberland Avenue, a cut above the Soho drinking club which Jimmy usually patronised as his personal contribution towards defeating the menace of the licensing laws.

Lorimer wanted to talk. They were his captive audience. He had found four leather chairs, and pinned them into position with gins and tonics. That suited Jimmy—anything that kept the afternoon artificial and crazy would help.

"We made an impression they won't forget in a hurry. We got right on their wavelength."

"Threatening to go," said Jessie, her dull eyes momentarily agleam. "That was perfectly brilliant."

"The good old War House," said Lorimer, rubbing his hands. "If I ever whisper 'War House' in future," he said, looking round at the circle of faces, "it will mean, get up and walk out of the meeting."

They nodded seriously, like people who have just been given an important password. Then he grinned as if mocking them for taking him seriously.

Lorimer knew he'd sleep now. The military atmosphere had brought it all back to him, plain and quick and vivid. With pounding heart he'd opened his mouth and killed the German officer all over again.

"We might have strengthened our case," said Monk, dropping his own folder of lay-outs on to the table-top, "by leaving these."

"Too much like touting," said Lorimer sharply. Monk was definitely wrong. The thing had been handled perfectly.

A second round of drinks came, but Jessie said she had to go back to IAS and get an important letter off. The glasses were poured and the surplus tonic water began to accumulate in rows of half-empty little bottles.

"Even though we probably won't get the account," said Lorimer to the three men after they'd rearranged the chairs, "a Merry Christmas, everybody."

It came as a little shock all round. Tomorrow was after all Christmas Eve.

Just when Jimmy thought he'd succeeded in put-

ting her out of his mind, Lorimer remarked, "Attractive woman, that. In the end she'll go off with some man, and we'll lose her."

Then he started to boast moderately about deals he had swung in the past.

"Creative service," he said. "If you're honestly giving them creative service you can confidently go and say exactly what's in your mind." The two younger men nodded, as if that were something they intended to remember always.

Jimmy got back to IAS just as the end-of-day rush hour began. He went to his own office but there hadn't been any calls. He felt slightly drunk, as if all those papers on the desk belonged to someone different.

He found himself walking along the corridor to Jessie's room. He merely wanted to tell her that he was leaving IAS. She ought to be the first to know, and she'd understand too, because it would be better for both of them.

There was no one in her office either, but her handbag was still there.

He walked across to her tidy desk. On it, beside some chrysanthemums, was a framed portrait of her little boy. He had a nice face, but thin, not a bit like Jessie.

On her note-pad he cunningly wrote, PLEASE RING EXT 61 TONIGHT URGENT. There was a sporting chance she might not recall whose extension that was. And even so, she might think it had to do with business.

The smart black jacket of her two-piece was on a coat-hanger behind the door. He couldn't resist touching it, lifting the sleeve to his face and sniffing the perfume.

She came blundering through the door just then, her face shiny, washed but not made up. When she saw him, her soft, full, pale lips went together in a harsh line.

"I don't want to see you. Had enough already."

"I'm going," he said. "Leaving IAS."

She sat down heavily in a metal-framed chair meant for visitors.

"Oh, my God." He watched her pointed nails dig into the palms of her own hands.

"You not here?" She looked him in the face, then looked away. "It's hard to imagine."

She reached for her open handbag. Instead of make-up she took out a peppermint, looked at it, twiddled the wrappings and put it back again. "I suppose I must love you," she said in a numb, almost incredulous voice.

"I'd better go."

"I suppose so. Oh, this is awful. Why did we ever start it?"

He mumbled something and groped incompetently for the door-handle, forcing himself not to turn around and put his hands on her sad shoulders and draw her towards him.

Back in his office he sat down at his desk and stared for a while at the typewritten trash scattered across it. The nonsense. Made him feel sick.

He said aloud, self-consciously, "I might as well get this over."

He rang up Lorimer's secretary, who was used to working long after the others had left. Mr. Lorimer was engaged with the accountant just now, but would be free in ten minutes.

He tried thinking about Lorimer's secretary. Once a long while ago she must have been a good-looking girl. Now she could be a real old battle-axe when she tried. She'd been Bertram's secretary, too—so fascinated, year after year, by his grand panjandrum ways, that she'd never married.

Now she was mothering Lorimer—and in ways that Bertram in his time would probably have sneered at. But Lorimer thrived on being mothered. He was mothered at home and mothered at the office, like a clever and rather charming boy who is indulged under cover of firmness because that very day he is going in for a scholarship or conscription or some other tribal ordeal on the way to full manhood.

When Jimmy went in, ten minutes later, Lorimer was sitting crossways with one leg hung over the arm of his chair. He was smiling like a plump baby who has just brought up wind. He too was a little drunk.

'For my own peace of mind,' thought Jimmy, 'I should tell him the exact truth. But will he see the point—particularly after our confidential booze-up, all pals together?'

"Something personal? Take a seat, won't you? Cigarette?"

'How bloody awful that picture is,' thought Jimmy.

'Wonder what the clients think when they see it? Assuming any of the clients has taste, which hardly bears arguing.'

Tipsy as he was, Lorimer had a shrewd idea what was coming. How often he'd seen them coming in before, with that 'breaking up for the holidays' look peeping out from behind their apprehension. Glee-fully jumping out of his frying-pan into someone else's fire.

He felt alcoholically rather regretful because he'd liked Jimmy James. Capable and prepared to speak his mind. And there was always the private reflection, 'If only I'd left Bertram in the lurch and struck out on my own. What might I not have made of myself?'

"Well," he said, after the cigarette had been lit and still nothing spoken. "You can always change your mind."

"I came to give in my notice."

"A better job, I dare say."

Lorimer tried to create a vague impression among his staff that no other reputable agency would take a man from IAS without first ringing up and making sure it wasn't putting him to any personal inconvenience. In reality, every agency poached staff from every other, quite shamelessly.

"No, I've nothing else in view."

"Come into some money?"

"No."

"Then why? You like it here. We like having you."

"I've just decided."

"You don't have to discuss it." He remembered how awkward he and Jessie Garland had been that morning, face to face in the cab. There are always things going on that you can't be perfectly certain about.

But apparently no scandal. Good research men are much easier to get hold of than good executives. It might all turn out for the best.

"But tell me this. You've been reasonably happy here?"

"I don't mind discussing it." Jimmy James had found his voice and his nerve at last. "In fact, I've come in here to discuss it."

"A chap like you, Jimmy," said Lorimer, chin on knuckles, talking as if Jimmy James had already left and was just a memory, "gets to be regarded as a fixture. You've done a good job here, and I'm only afraid we've all taken you for granted."

The thought crossed Lorimer's mind. 'Are they planning to leave together? That *would* be a blow.'

Suavely he said, "After all the time we've known each other, you can be completely frank with me."

"It's been a long while boiling up." Jimmy knocked the ash off his cigarette, sucked in another mouthful of smoke, inhaled it, felt remarkably clear-headed. "I'm not trying to be personally offensive. But I can't stand advertising any more."

"So we're not paying you enough?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Something else on your mind?"

Jimmy thought, 'Why bother? Why inflict all that stuff about war and peace on him—he's happy.' But

he was curious to see what Lorimer with his almost feminine gift for anticipating a trend in a conversation would make of his reasons.

"You could call them reservations about advertising. The people here at IAS are all very nice. But leaving that aside, how many advertisements do we work on that aren't in fact an elaborate sort of lie?"

"You might say that the average stage play is rather the same kind of lie." The reassuring argument slipped easily out of Lorimer's mouth. "So is the average film. All art—all creative activity—is by its very nature a sort of lie."

"We're mucking about with people's minds—exploiting sex and fear."

Lorimer, who never liked discussing sex, even indirectly, answered with a neutral nervous cough. When he was younger, arguments as direct as this had been the breath of his existence. At such a moment, when all his ideas were being decried, and by a younger man too, he had to win, he had to triumph and dominate.

"And the classier advertising: as if it's the peak of civilisation to live in a semi-detached villa with a refrigerator and a mortgage. Selling the way of life of the suburban bank clerk as ideal——"

"Are we so far wrong?" asked Lorimer quietly. "Little as you approve of him, he's typical—he's the representative citizen. This is a democracy. Would you rather impose the views of some small, self-appointed intellectual clique? Is that what you're after?"

"I know the arguments, of course," said Jimmy. He'd not bargained for this. He'd expected to state his views rather forcibly and encounter maybe a polite scepticism and part friends. "Because previously I've used them myself. But in all seriousness, when you stop to consider——"

"How do you propose to shift the mass production of a big factory, unless we stimulate public demand?"

"Yes, of course," said Jimmy. He was trying now to recall the ideas that had flashed so brilliantly through his mind at the original creative conference on 'Operation King's Shilling'.

"And on account of that one misgiving, you're going to walk out of a job with a four-figure salary and the prospect of a remarkable career. I tell you this—principles are one thing, and I respect them. But sheer crankiness is quite another."

"There's more to it yet."

Lorimer knew what that might mean. Would it come out about Jessie Garland?

"More to it—a lot more. Let's take this new account." He leaned forward in the chair, stubbed out the fag, looked Lorimer right in the eye. Lorimer smiled, liking him better now he'd finally got his nerve up.

"Look, sir, you're an ex-serviceman and so am I. So surely it sticks in your gullet, too."

"What?"

"Recruiting. Trapping boys who don't know better. Telling them the tale, when we know from past experience what it's really like."

"So you were in the Army?"

"No. The RAF."

"Of course. Well, there's nothing wrong with the Army."

"Don't say you're one of those. You couldn't have liked war."

"There's rather a difference between trench warfare," said Lorimer acidly, "and bombing civilians from the relative safety of large aeroplanes. No. If it interests you, I didn't like war—no sane man could."

"Then that's my point."

"I'm not talking about war. I'm talking about the Army. Look at the young men you see. Pasty faced. Always sucking a fag. Wearing these ridiculous clothes. The Army will do 'em good. Make them stand up straight and keep their mouths shut. Teach them a little discipline."

Jimmy sensed that he wasn't talking now to the real Lorimer, but to a gramophone voice that wore his clothes. For some deep reason, Lorimer could only discuss war from behind a defensive screen of crude, first-class-dining-car ideas.

Jimmy decided to try once more. "My generation knew in advance roughly what to expect. And it was nowhere near so godawful as the men who'd fought in the trenches led us to suppose. But your lot walked head first into it. The papers told you it was a crusade, waged by knights in shining armour. And what you were really let in for was poison gas and creeping barrages and all that."

"I don't see the connection. I don't see this is getting us anywhere."

"And now I suppose we dress the whole thing up to make mugs of a new generation. We personally—you and I and Monk downstairs——" Of its own accord his tongue excluded Jessie.

"We've not got the account yet," said Lorimer ruefully; but a good counter-argument was forming in his mind. "A regular army. Yes. But where are the Regulars coming from? A press gang? Or simply persuade them—democratically?"

"Must we have a regular army?" Jimmy knew it was weak, but he was running out of ideas.

"Now look here, James." (For a second time today the German officer had been shot and killed. Lorimer, deeply excited, could see everything straightforward now. He was going to win this argument so easily he could even afford to be brutal about it.) "I've never regarded you as a fool. Name just one great power that hasn't got an army. And don't try kidding me about your friends the Russians—they've got millions under arms."

Jimmy had no chance to object that the Russians weren't specially his friends. It came over him now in a tide.

"You know as well as I do what keeps this country going. If tomorrow they stopped rearming, we'd all be in Queer Street. And you know damned well why we'll go on needing a big army. To keep this tiny overcrowded island a going concern, we must hang on to the Empire. We can give them the vote and self-

government, yes—but the Army is our last resort. You know it; I know it. But of course we don't necessarily let our minds dwell on it. How nice if it were otherwise. A world where brother takes the hand of brother. We can try and improve the world we live in—I think we should. But facts are facts——”

The internal phone rang. Taking it off the hook he said, “I'm busy. Tell Miss Mahoney. Has she gone?”

Jimmy himself was going to slide through the door, but Lorimer held out another cigarette and gestured him back to a chair.

“You have to take the world as it is. Of course, no one can live a full life without ideals. But you don't want to take them cut and dried from some left-wing pamphlet. You must work them out for yourself. Now, d'you know what my ideals are?”

Jimmy thought it was a bit sickening, but nodded his head just out of vulgar curiosity. His own father had been a Tory working man—an old sweat, taking his opinions stereotyped from the *Daily Mail*; but about practical matters he'd had an extraordinarily quick intelligence. In some ways Lorimer surprisingly resembled him. And by the look of it, such ready-made ideas were equal to all life's needs. There was no gnawing at the heart, no perplexity. When a question was asked, the answer was ready.

Momentarily Jimmy had begun to hate Lorimer. Somehow, by some flash of eloquence, he wanted to win this argument. So why not hit out? He was leaving anyway.

Lorimer was saying, "Here's the world, two thousand million people, all sorts and conditions of men. Different colours, different languages, but they've all got to live with each other on the same planet."

"Yes?"

"On the other hand, marvellous means of communication. Microphones. Rotary presses. Psychology. Market research. Creative techniques. All that we lack are the right men to connect the one with the other. Take the present position. The average citizen doesn't understand how government or industry work. He doesn't realise what the other fellow is doing, and he doesn't want to know, either. That's where we come in. We're not all that pretentious. We're interested, most of the time, in persuading human beings to buy the things they must have anyway—food, clothing, furniture, travel, the simple necessities. But if we succeed in that, it's because we're slowly working out a basic technique of human persuasion. We are linking man with man. We are getting people to do things without their even realising when it was they were persuaded. Now at the soap-and-margarine level I know this seems sordid and trivial. But look beyond it, to the future; to the years that I may not live to see, but you certainly will. The simple, effective techniques of mass communication—uniting the human family."

"You begin to see it happening already," said Jimmy, so quietly it didn't sound ironic. "Every place in the world you go, you see advertisements for Coca-Cola."

"Exactly." Lorimer's eyes shone.

Jimmy's voice hardened. "The trouble's this. An advertisement that implies the Army has something to do with peace is telling a lie. It has something to do with war. The Army's there so that in the last resort we can go to war, probably against a badly-armed colonial people. Or, in the mass-communications phrase, bandits. Isn't that what you said?"

Lorimer was staring back at him with fixed eyes, like a chess player waiting for a false move.

"Now it seems to me," Jimmy continued, rather liking the sound of his own voice, "that men can only be brothers if they tell each other the truth. And telling the truth isn't easy. Not half as easy as paying an advertising agency to call the War Office the Peace Office, and to imply that soldiers, instead of being professional assassins, are really ambassadors of peace. That's a lie—a whopping big one, and you and I both realise it's a lie because we happen to know about war at first hand. But what about the millions of young men who don't, who get their idea of war from watching the films? Will it help to unite the human family if we tell those particular young men a big lie?"

To win this argument had now become a matter of the deepest concern to Lorimer. No one had spoken to him like this for years. He wasn't interested any more in the logic of his own arguments, only in their battering effectiveness. Even if he made an enemy for life, he had to win.

He said quietly, to give it more effect, "At this

moment you're telling a big lie yourself. All these intellectual notions of yours are so much eyewash, and you know it."

Jimmy, feeling rather pleased with himself, wasn't quite prepared for such a hammer blow.

"Your real reason for leaving IAS has nothing at all to do with high moral principles. On the contrary. You're quitting because as a married man you've become involved in a sexual intrigue with a woman colleague, and it's become too hot for you to handle. Am I right?" he said triumphantly, "or do I name her?"

Jimmy James's face was white; when he tried to speak, nothing came but a protesting grunt.

Like a man relenting somewhat, Lorimer said, "These things go on all the time in offices. It's human nature."

Jimmy said, "How can you be so sure?"

"I'm an older man than you. Maybe you won't be offended if I give you a word of advice." He didn't bother to wait for Jimmy's permission. "This sort of thing goes on all the time. A hangover or a headache or an unhappy flirtation—and instead of minding his own business, a man finds himself worrying about the fate of the world." He smiled as he remembered his own momentary weakness a few days ago, after the nightmares. He quite expected a smile back. Maybe a wry, half-hearted one, but a smile. Jimmy James had a sense of humour, hadn't he? But the look on his face was cold and implacable.

Lorimer reached into a drawer for a cheque-book.

The one undeniably good thing about money was that you could buy off unpleasantness.

"Come in tomorrow and get your things," he said affably. "I shan't be here, so you won't have to bother about avoiding me. I'm giving you two months' salary. You won't find it particularly easy to find another research job. But after our little chat I appreciate your reasons for going, even if I don't approve of them. If anything suitable crops up elsewhere, I'll let you know."

Jimmy James wished he had it in him to tear up the cheque and throw the bits in Lorimer's face. But no. He was glad of the money. It was more than he expected. or probably deserved, either. So tomorrow would be his last day at IAS. It wouldn't drag on. There'd be a clean break. And when people came back from their Christmas holiday they'd all find him gone.

He turned and went from the room without shaking or even noticing Lorimer's outstretched hand, holding the cheque in his own hand like a dazed schoolboy with a prize. Once outside, all manner of arguments began to occur to him. Some of them were very effective and quite unanswerable, too. But what really hit him, and made his hand tremble as he stopped on the stairs to put the cheque in his wallet, was the unfairness. There were certain unwritten rules about the way one man should exchange views with another; and Lorimer by dragging in the question of Jessie Garland had deliberately broken them.

Of course, in his business he was cheating on

human relationships all the time. Taking advantage of the way people were made, just as a high-pressure salesman takes advantage of the hand-shaking rituals of true friendship in order to force a sale. That was a neat comparison, and brought a crooked smile to his mouth as he went down the stairs.

Absent-mindedly he went to his office to get his coat, and there she was, looking mildly dishevelled, anxiously waiting for him. She must have been waiting there a long time. She saw the smile, and misunderstood.

"Did it go all right? Was he nice about it?"

He lifted his coat, looked at it, and then put it back on the hook. He'd already drooped the scarf around his neck.

"As a matter of fact he was rather beastly."

"No?" Then she smiled. "You just want sympathy."

"He was damned insulting."

"Did my name come out?"

"He hinted at it. D'you mind?"

"I'd like to tell him to his face. I'd like to chalk it on his door."

"Didn't we already say good-bye?"

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow. He gave me two months' salary."

"Listen to me," she said, quickly intense, taking him by the arm. "Your wife will have you for the rest of your life. All I've got is tonight and tomorrow. Haven't I got a right to it?"

She wasn't asking his permission. She had thought

this out and now was telling him, like an actress repeating her lines. The softness had gone out of her face. With her other hand she took hold of his lapel, as if forcing him to listen.

"I'm giving you up. But I'm entitled to something. I may be a bad woman but I'm not just a plaything. I'm a person. I've been sitting here, thinking it all out "

Then he realised that she too was more than a little drunk, just like Lorimer and himself before their argument sobered them.

"Come on," she said, "kiss me." She was pushing herself against him. She was kissing his mouth—all muscle and force and fear—as a child kisses her father before being torn away and bundled terrifyingly off to school.

He held her tight so that she wouldn't be insulted, and tried hard to concentrate his mind.

"I booked that room for a second night," she said, in a secret but triumphant voice close to his cheek. "I'll go down and fix my face. You'd better ring your wife and think of something to tell her."

She went out of the room.

He felt terrified. It started as a loophole into freedom, and now it was a big soft trap, and he was in it up to his neck.

He rang his home number, half hoping they wouldn't put him through, but the switchboard for some obscure reason was still working.

A mechanical travesty of Sarah's voice asked, "Well, what about it?"

"I leave tomorrow—for good."

"Was it very tough?"

He purposely didn't answer that. He said, "He gave me two months' salary."

"You just told him straight?"

"Quite straight."

"Well. I think he's treated you rather well."

She was supposed to hate the wicked capitalists, not praise them!

He said, "Listen, I'm not coming home tonight."

There was a pause. Then, in her mannish, all-pals-together tone she said, "That's right, dear. Go and get stinking drunk."

He said, "I'm fairly drunk already."

"Look after yourself," she said. "'Bye now."

No jealousy, no protest. She'd simply made up her mind not to quarrel, because she knew she had the mastery of him. It was humiliating, like letting a prisoner out on ticket of leave. He knew of old the look on her face that went with permission to "go out and get stinking drunk." Mild contempt, yet in a strange way enjoying his very weakness.

In the empty entrance hall he waited for Jessie. This time there was no quiver of expectation. It was as dead as marrying for money.

One of the cleaners, coming up from the basement, said, "Merry Christmas, in case I don't see you tomorrow, Mr. James."

"Merry Christmas," he said, the grin freezing on his face.

Jessie came down the stairs, clop-clop on three-inch

heels. She was wearing her imitation fur coat of white nylon. On anyone else it might have looked tartish, but not on her, because just now across her face was a look extraordinarily tender.

She came close to him and asked him with half a smile, "Were you looking forward to it?"

"To what?"

"If so, you'd have known. One night of love."

He was so embarrassed that he looked down at his shoes.

"You're dreading it, aren't you?" Now she was almost laughing.

He said, "I could wring your neck." But he too had now begun to smile.

"I cancelled the room. It was a beastly idea. I'd gone broody, like some old hen. But it's quite over—I'm a good girl now"

"Of course——" he began.

She took his hand. "I know. I can hear you think."

"I think women are fundamentally better than men," he said, having to some extent Sarah in mind as well as Jessie. "That surprises you, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "That does surprise me a little. Let's go and sit on a seat in Bloomsbury Square, and kiss good-bye in the most flagrant manner possible."

It was a cold night for kissing. Sitting there amidst the dark shrubbery they felt conspicuous and rather middle-aged. When the novelty of pretending to be a youthful courting couple was over, they lit cigarettes

and just leaned comfortably against each other.

"I wonder why we do it?" she said. "Bed. Why's it so frightfully important? I was thinking all this tonight, while you were arguing the toss with Lorimer."

"It feels rather nice, to put it mildly."

"Not always for a woman," she told him. "You can even be cynical at the actual time, but it's always important. For the first time in my life I've realised what a dreadful thing it is, doing it without meaning it."

"Yes?" he said, not listening to the words but entranced by watching her face as she spoke them.

"For men it's different. They've got to have it, haven't they? It's a hunger, like food and drink,"

"Oh no they haven't," he said, reaching out to stop that one as it flew past. "That's just what they tell you—those men."

"No?" Incredulously.

"Of all relationships between people," he said, remembering Lorimer's cough at the word "sex", "it's usually the most dishonest. Because they muck about with it so."

"Why's it so special?" she said with a heart-shaking giggle. "A piece of you inside of me, and all that leaping about. Isn't it silly if you sit back and think."

He found he was shutting up her giggle with a long kiss.

In a low voice he found it hard to control, he said, "I'll tell you why. It's one of the few ways human beings have of getting close to each other. Really close

—closer than in any other way. Talking the same language, not with words that can be misunderstood or twisted, but with their bodies. You know what it is the Prayer Book says, 'With my body I thee worship'."

"So you are religious, after all," she said, as if that, at least, was settled. After a pause she added, soberly, "But it can go so wrong."

"You're so right it can."

"I mean, not only the obvious thing—doing it with the wrong man or for the wrong reason. But other things. You can be ever so much in love, but he accidentally tugs your hair, or bites instead of kissing, and it doesn't go right."

"And I suppose in a woman," he said, "there's a fear of babies."

"Not a fear," she said, with impressive quietness. "I realised that the other night, when I spoke about having a baby, and you laughed at me. You must get babies out of your mind. You love each other, and so you want to be honest and get close."

'That expresses it well,' thought Jimmy. 'Be honest. Get close.'

"I think it's different," he said. "I think the couple in bed must be free. I mean, as we are, you and I, tonight."

"You mean you're glad," she asked in a low voice, "not to be tied to me for ever?"

"It can't work if people are tied. It's like giving it a price. Support me for the rest of my life, and then do what you like with me."

"You mean I must keep them separate," she asked wryly. "Love and husband hunting?"

"We've never been more honest than tonight," he said.

"It's not so easy. But no, we've never been more honest than tonight."

"We could try it and see," he said. In the pause that followed, his remark stood up in the conversation like a big black milestone.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Perhaps they haven't let that room," he said. "We could say we'd changed our plans."

"If I'd realised that about men and hunger," she told him, "it might all have been different."

"Seeing you around at IAS," he said, "was the one thing that kept me going."

"Do you love me?" Her voice was naïve. It was the acid test. It always had to be, in the magazines and on the films.

"Hopelessly is the word."

"I suppose we could go there," she said, "the way we feel now, at this minute. And be close and honest."

She reached a gloved hand towards him as if seeking reassurance.

"Yes," he said, "yes."

They got up and sedately walked the few streets towards the double room in the second-rate hotel, like a betrothed couple on their way to church.

When they were twenty yards away and could read the actual name of the hotel on the lit canopy over the entrance, her intense calmness went. Standing on the

kerbstone under a street light she clutched his sleeve.

"I'm terrified."

"All that talk back there——"

"At the time it may have meant something. But now I've lost you——"

He said, "We agree we've got to be honest. But I can't trust my feelings."

"But you must," she said. "You must."

'It's the price we all pay,' he reflected, 'for tampering with other people's emotions. At a moment like this, you can't trust your own.'

A very big but very young policeman—so young he seemed like an overgrown lad dressed up in policeman's clothes—had come up silently behind their backs.

"Move along there," he said, in a deep, harsh voice that obviously was not the one he used at home with his mother.

"What do you mean?" said Jessie, truculently. "Move along?"

A lock of hair had fallen loose from under the brim of her silly hat, her breath smelled of gin, and she was standing under a street lamp in a white imitation fur coat, talking to a man.

"This person annoying you, sir?" the young policeman asked Jimmy. "Will you make a complaint?"

Jessie was slow in catching the implication. But Jimmy got it right between the eyes. For once in an encounter with authority he came back with just the right words in just the right tone.

"How long have you been in the force?"

"Never you mind," said the young policeman, trying to edge between them.

"Because until they teach you to distinguish between a respectable married woman and a tart I think they should take you off the beat and put you back to school."

"Watch what you're saying."

"Will you apologise to this lady now, or shall I make a complaint to your Division?"

There was a silence while the young policeman tried to recall how you coped with a situation like this. Then he remembered that legally the highway was for passing and repassing; not for standing still.

"Pass along now," he said sternly. "Just keep moving like I say."

She was gripping his wrist tight, painfully tight, like someone in the water afraid of drowning. She walked unsteadily, hanging on his arm. The policeman, watching her gait, wondered whether he'd missed a chance to get her on a charge of drunk and disorderly.

"So awful," said Jessie. The words came expiringly from somewhere deep inside her.

"Bloody young fool."

"But he thought so. A policeman. Jimmy, it must show."

He didn't know what to answer. His expansive slightly boastful feeling—because it's hard to snub a policeman—contracted at her words into a cold, hard knot.

"Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"Oh not. Not a drink."

She could see herself, pushing through the swing doors into a saloon bar, and all the men there looking up and mistaking her for a prostitute.

"An Espresso." If only they could sit and talk again, this fierce, painful grip of hers over his wrist might naturally relax.

They sat facing at a little knee-high table, and the coffee stood beside a pile of sickly-looking *brioches*.

Jimmy had an uncanny feeling that everything was over.

"Feel better now, old thing?"

Her ravaged face looked at him.

"Oh Jimmy, I don't, do I?"

He smiled at her, as if a cheerful look alone could give her the good feeling again. "Apart from the coat, no. The coat is a mistake."

"I'll burn it."

The hard, obsessed, irrelevant faces of the tarts who accosted one in the back streets of the West End came into his mind. Everything this face had they lacked—the tenderness, the generosity.

She was putting her hands up, touching her features as though they were covered with invisible spiders' webs. In a tiny little death-bed voice she asked. "It doesn't show?"

"What doesn't show?"

"The wickedness. The loose living." She was saying the words frankly, like a confession, as if from the judgement of that young policeman there could be no possible appeal.

"I've got three things to say." This was a moment for complete sincerity. You dare not sound false when she was trusting you to appraise her whole life.

"First: the suburbs of London are full of respectable married women whose minds are infinitely more wicked and licentious than yours will ever be——"

"Minds, yes. But bodies."

"Loving kindness. That's all you've got to reproach yourself with. The second point: that young policeman's green, a country bumpkin. You know what coppers are—looking on everyone as a potential criminal——"

"But aren't we?"

"Don't you mistrust policemen?"

She shook her head, wonderingly. This was a difference between them. She'd been brought up in some nice suburb where the policemen protected you from the great dark without. For him, policemen had been the ones who copped you if you pinched off the barrows.

"And the third thing?"

"I forgot. Except that I love you—and I couldn't unless you were pure in heart."

Loving kindness? Pure in heart? Where had these phrases sprung from?

"What am I going to do?" she whispered hoarsely, but didn't look at him, didn't even expect him to provide an answer.

He found himself alone on a street corner. It was all finished. Nothing final had been said, they'd even kissed good-bye. But they both knew it was all over. She wouldn't be at IAS when he went next day to collect his things. Unless by accident, they'd never see each other again for the rest of their lives.

He'd had enough wild, devastating feeling to last him a very long time. He wanted now to do something trivial and unimportant, that would bring everything down to normal. He wanted a foretaste of the endless responsible dull married life that now lay ahead of him.

Sorting out the right number of pennies he went to phone Sarah.

"You're not drunk, then?"

"Never more sober. Look, put on a hat and come up West right away. We can just catch a show."

"Don't be silly. I don't wear a hat." It was Jessie who wore hats. "What show?"

"Any show, providing it's got no artistic merit or social significance whatsoever."

"That means a musical. We'll never get in."

"We shall if we pay enough."

"You sound reckless."

He went on to tell her where to meet.

She came up extravagantly by cab, like a student on an escapade. She stood there under a street light, hatless, thick-bodied, glittering eyed.

"So we celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

"You gave up your job, didn't you?"
He had quite forgotten.

Jessie was on the top of a bus, biting a finger of her glove and hoping her misery didn't show too much.

After Jimmy there could be no one. Soon she would be getting too old. Men of her own age were too self-centred to see into her heart, but the younger ones were so shallow.

'Why should I be punished like this?' she asked herself. Because looking back she knew Jimmy had been right, there was nothing at all to regret. Yet now it was closing in on her, this world that had no use for her kind of love, only for things that could be bought and sold.

She tried to think calmly of Tony. There was always Tony. But if by loving she filled too much of his life, that would ruin him. Look at these men with possessive mothers.

'Alone,' she reflected. 'I've got to live alone.'

The thought calmed her, sad though it was. After a while she began to notice the other people on the bus. She started to play her favourite game, of making up stories about their lives, guessing what went on behind their blank, unexpressive faces.

Sarah was walking beside a man who had Jimmy's face, but an unfamiliar manner, as if his self-possession concealed some inward fury. The way he had

taken command of their evening reminded her of their very first meetings at college, when he spent the few remaining pounds of his gratuity on giving her a good time.

The Jimmy she now walked beside might be better or worse, but he was quite different.

Half-way down noisy Regent Street she realised. She didn't know this man, in fact had never known him. She'd but accepted him, quite without understanding, much as children accept grown-ups. What made him different one day from another? What prompted him to behave wildly, as he'd done in this past week. All this remained for her in some way to discover.

People in the mass—the tendencies of world movements—these she could clearly understand. But every single individual around her was as it were a separate world, and took as much if not more understanding. Except that for this purpose the political analysis that she so confidently grasped was no use at all.

"Jimmy," she said.

"Yes?" He was thinking out the quickest way of crossing Piccadilly, and had just decided it would pay to use the subway.

"Will you help me?"

"What?"

"Understand you better."

"Don't be silly," he said, "I don't understand myself."

"Oh, don't let's go down the hole," she told him.

"Let's take a chance with the traffic."

CHAPTER TEN

In the morning—it being Christmas Eve—he went into IAS to collect his personal things.

One or two colleagues came in to say rather clumsily that they were sorry he was going. When they asked why and he told them he objected to working on army recruiting they nodded and pretended to sympathise. But they didn't exactly believe him. For one thing, IAS already had one hundred-per-cent conscientious objector in Monk. And if he didn't object to working on the account, why did Jimmy, who was always one of the boys, and had won a DFC, and was always good for a new dirty joke. In any event, Lorimer had rung up John Cox and dropped a hint, and Cox of course was spreading it round about Jessie Garland. Though no one thought the less of Jimmy for trying to protect her by saying it was otherwise.

Monk however heard first of Jimmy's own reason, and believed it. He felt terrible—as if his own shadow had got up and walked away from him.

Monk came into Jimmy's office, closed the door like a conspirator and stuck out his hand.

"What a stand!" he said, "How I admire you!"

Jimmy took his hand rather cautiously, because Monk cultivated a bone-breakingly manly grip.

"It should have happened long ago," Monk went

on. "Teach them a lesson." He dropped his voice confidentially. "I've a good mind to resign as well."

He stood there, anxious yet expectant, as if dreading that Jimmy might say, 'Yes, you resign too.'

Jimmy couldn't resist it. Inwardly he was laughing, sardonically. Let there be one last lie; let it be a whopper.

He said, "Are you sure you've got it right?"

"You wouldn't work on army recruiting. Wasn't that it?"

They looked each other in the eye. The tension grew.

"The fact is," said Jimmy quietly, "I got into rather a mess with a girl."

Monk's face went from fear to contempt in a fraction of a second, like pulling off one mask and replacing it by another.

"It's been nice working with you," said Jimmy. "Give my regards to your wife. And about that other thing."

"Yes?" Coldly, as if Jimmy were not entitled even to express a casual opinion about that other thing.

"Surely no one resigns from principle any more? We're all in the rat-race, aren't we?"

"I think you underestimate people," said Monk. "It's a fatal mistake." He went out with a certain amount of dignity.

'I've misjudged that man,' thought Jimmy, feeling rather ashamed of himself. 'There's more good in him than I realised.'

Jimmy's secretary was so upset at his going that she

actually wept a couple of big slow tears. That was the most surprising thing of all. He'd believed that she rather disliked him.

And so for the last time through the front door and down the steps, past the naked-looking plane trees flanking the dull green square. Behind him came a quick surge of IAS people chaffing each other about Merry Christmas. He turned away from them towards the British Museum, and as their chatter went farther and farther from him, he began for the first time to feel lonely.

A hell of a Christmas Eve.

First you wrote the Christmas ads, laying out the festive slogans amid the sprigs of holly sometime in September or October. The buyers in the big shops ordered in their stocks. The personnel managers recruited old useless men from the Labour Exchange to wear false beards and red cloaks. Spirits were taken out of bond in readiness, so that people who might rather dislike each other sober could be mutually filled with loving-kindness. Peace on earth, goodwill to all men—and in all the cinemas all the mighty Wurlitzers played carols.

Not to mention a radio or a telly, dripping goodwill. They'd been planning those programmes months ahead, getting them down on tape and wiping out any accidental whisper that didn't provide its adequate quota of brotherly love.

In the Army the officers would wait on the men, and

then everyone would get democratically drunk. Army chaplains might even preach peace on earth and no one would arrest them for sedition, because it was all only for one day.

'Well, and why not a festival of peace on earth,' he told himself, emerging into the morbid coloured chaos of Tottenham Court Road. 'Why not a family treat with presents for the kiddies? It's a fundamentally good idea, so for Christ's sake stop nagging at yourself.'

The first pub he looked in was full of perfect strangers wishing each other the compliments of the season over the tops of small ports and pint glasses. He just hadn't got the fortitude to push to the bar.

And as he walked away, alone, he found himself oddly enough reaching a certain kind of insight—like the one he'd experienced at the original meeting of the recruiting campaign, though not so lucid and explicit. This feeling expanding in him now was a big diffused sentiment of dissatisfaction at the way they were domesticating the world, even gelding it.

Very soon no one would be able to give a straight answer. We'd have become the victims of so much humbug—sales talk, slanted news, cheesecake, pie in the sky—that when a really big crisis came, no one would dare admit it. With no one bold enough to cope, our entire society would probably go to squash, like something over-ripe.

On the way down Charing Cross Road was a bookshop that always displayed nude photographs. He often passed it, but made a point of not looking, just to show they couldn't make *his* head jerk round. But

today he stopped and looked; today it wasn't pornography any more but a sociological phenomenon. Very soon a crowd collected, as it will when one staring man makes it all right for others to peep.

So there they were, every age from fifteen to fifty, gaping in a shop window at photographs of women with no clothes on.

But in fact the women didn't look real. Somehow an actual living woman with no clothes on looks piteous and defenceless. It's only under a cabaret spotlight or against a faked photographic background that nakedness begins to look what commerce had decided sex must resemble.

To the boy standing self-consciously beside him he wanted to say, "It's never like that. If that's what you are led to expect, then you'll be properly foxed when the real thing is standing there, piteous and defenceless yet terrible. Women are not commodities but people—she'll be a person, not something you can unwrap and gloat over when she takes your fancy."

"Give me the one with the tits," came a snigger from behind him.

The quick, coarse words of Jimmy's answer flashed unpremeditated on to his tongue.

"Go and buy yourself a feeding bottle."

The man—he was middle-aged and well-dressed, with a neat moustache and a very small nose—pushed his face impolitely close.

"Look here!" he said, pretty fiercely.

They were turning away from the bright, book-filled window, all of them wondering what was going

happen, half-hoping it might be some sort of violence. Though few had heard the actual words, they all sensed from the tone and attitude that something was up. Maybe a scuffle here, in the middle of decorous London, between two well-dressed men both old enough to know better!

Almost involuntarily, Jimmy hit on the right phrase for getting out of all this.

"No offence. It is Christmas Eve."

The man with the little nose glared ferociously. Those particular words had insulted him deeply, he wasn't quite sure why.

"Well," said a bystander of a judicious turn of mind, "he did apologise."

"Why can't he mind his own business?" declared Small Nose, squaring his shoulders. "Feeding bottle!"

Jimmy saw a blue uniform ten yards away. His eyes became focused with extraordinary clarity on the face under the helmet. Incredible, but after all, why not? It was quite likely a stretch of his accustomed beat.

The young policeman he'd snubbed so thoroughly yesterday!

Turning, he pushed his way through the circle of men's faces and scuttled up a side street.

"Scared of the copper," said the judicious one. "You should have held on to him, mate."

Jimmy found himself amid cafés and junk-shops at the top end of St. Martin's Lane.

Ahead of him, occupying a lot of pavement, was the

familiar-looking back of a man in a big fluffy overcoat. In the crook of each arm, as carefully as newborn twins, he was carrying a pair of bottles.

It was Neill.

"For me," Neill announced, "it's the bloodiest time." He swivelled a bottle into his palm, and looked at the label. "What else is there? Once I went to a hotel, but there weren't any women that you'd call women, and at dinner we all wore paper hats. I could go home, I suppose, to Stoke-on-Trent."

But he said the last phrase so incredulously that you knew, for him, home was the last place on earth.

"Come back home with me," said Jimmy insincerely. He wanted to keep Neill near him—two colleagues walking sedately home from the office, and each would vouch for the other.

"Your wife wouldn't thank you, old boy."

Abruptly Neill ducked up an alley. "Ta-ta!"

'He didn't even say, "sorry you're leaving IAS,"' thought Jimmy, slightly aggrieved.

Probably he'd never see Neill again. For a few days his bitter rival—how silly that seemed now. Nor need he see any of them again, unless he wanted to. They'd go on burrowing and intriguing, of course, but so far as he was concerned they wouldn't exist.

He looked over his shoulder to see if the young policeman was still following. He wasn't; but standing there alone on the pavement Jimmy felt himself still sweating with apprehension.

Like sergeants in the Air Force, the police were notorious for it. Think you'd got away with it, and

they'd fix you for something else. For instance, the man who got away with a motoring offence on a legal technicality, and next day a plain clothes man called asking to see his wireless licence.

'I'm letting this get me down,' he thought, and so he was. But when sitting in the homeward train some time later he started to ponder on his fear. You had to be vigilant. There was this big pressure of society; you had to fight it day after day, persistently, both its outer manifestations and its reflections within yourself. What you were combating was not simply a young and foolish policeman but the fear he or anyone like him had the power of rousing in your own heart.

Yet once he arrived home, all the nerve strain dropped from him. The little nightmare of leaving was over. IAS was something he'd left behind him so completely that he need never even recall to mind what the people there looked and sounded like. Later on it would become a memory; part of his stock of memories, falsified. But now it was just as if someone had drawn a curtain across a lighted window. The dance was still going on within, but he was in the dark, and all that episode was over.

Christmas, with Sarah and Jimmy, was relaxed and almost ceremonious. This was the first year Sarah had taken Christmas seriously, without constant reminders as to what needed buying. There was enough to eat and drink, and the usual trimmings, even paper hats. But only two of them to enjoy it all, unless you count the unborn baby. So they moved through the toasts and meals and good wishes in an oddly restrained.

ritualistic way like two unfrozen China figures beginning actually to dance their cold minuet.

The past and the future were temporarily disregarded. This was a brief moment of peace in the heart of the winter; a sort of constrained happiness.

Everything went more slowly. All through Christmas Day and Boxing Day the telephone didn't ring once. They commuted from dining table to fireside. They played interminable games of cribbage, and to rouse an appetite went for futile, heavily-wrapped-up walks around the withdrawn, sunless streets. They made a little bit of clumsy and pathetic love.

The telephone rang for the first time, two days after Boxing Day.

Sarah was almost apologetic. "I'd quite forgot—the committee are meeting here this afternoon."

"I'll go and change the library books."

"They'll be gone by five."

But when he got home at quarter past, a bunch of them were still crammed in the front room. They were struggling with flour and paste and placards and poles long enough to poke holes through the windows.

"The men have let us down," a woman with a fringe said aggressively. They were all women, only one good-looking, none well dressed.

It was the sort of thing that happens all the time in political movements. Someone had promised faithfully to have the banners ready for the demonstration, but Christmas had got in the way. Now everything was being done rather incompetently at breakneck speed.

Cautiously he hooked one finger through the hole in a pair of scissors. Ought he to be angry with these women for treating his home as though it belonged to them? Sarah seemed too busy to say hello. She was brisk towards the other women, and indeed almost domineering. But then she turned to him over the top of bent heads and smiled privately, like a message in code.

The posters had slogans about German rearmament. Typographically they were awful—jammed tight, as if the most important thing had been to cram it all in, whether or not an onlooker could grasp what he saw. They were ugly, too. No self-respecting agency would ever have turned out anything so bad.

NO ARMS FOR THE NAZIS

Fair enough! But why qualify it with:

WE GREET OUR FRIENDS THE PEACE-
LOVING GERMANS

Can you have it both ways?

DON'T ARM THE GERMANS

Which Germans? The peace-loving Germans?

REMEMBER THE MILLIONS KILLED
IN THE DEATH CAMPS

Remember the millions killed? But everyone had forgotten, except the Jews themselves and the odd rare people with an over-vivid imagination. They'd even somehow contrived to wriggle out of the two minutes' silence that before the war had at least made everyone stop and think.

DEMAND A FOUR-POWER CONFERENCE TO TALK PEACE NOW

What a hope! What a fantastic hope!

"You look very serious," said Sarah, coming beside him and raising the edge of the poster with the flat of her hand, so he could trim it to fit the board.

"What a hope!" he said, pointing to the poster about the Four-Power talks.

"It's something in the future," she said, not didactically so much as comfortingly. "If we all do our utmost."

"They're pretty crude." The slogans that were already done looked positively embarrassing as they leaned crookedly against the wallpaper.

She sensed he wasn't saying this just to snipe at her, but because he really meant it. "We do the best we can."

"Hold the edge steady," he told her, "and give me the brush."

Afterwards he told himself he would have broken down and joined in anyway, whether he agreed with the slogans or not, and despite the absurd moral earnestness of these badly-dressed women with their

fantasy that they personally were changing the course of history. If there's a crowd of people and you're half-way human, you can't help joining in. It was the collective amateurishness that appealed to him.

When Sarah, who seldom lost an opportunity, said afterwards in her brisk political voice, "You'll march, of course," he laughed and said, "Maybe."

It was different—radically different—from going on a demo in a roll-necked sweater and getting into a boyish scuffle with a Blackshirt. He was respectable, with a mortgage and a life insurance policy. His hair was receding slightly, and he was getting thick around the middle.

It wasn't quite such a lark. Someone might see him. Lorimer might see him.

Then it dawned on him. He really had left IAS. He had no boss, and temporarily could even afford to be politically reckless.

In a serious voice (they were clearing up the mess the committee had left behind them) he said to her. "Look. If I march, will you stay behind?"

"You've started worrying?" She smiled, as if this were a big moment.

"What about the police?"

"You're a romantic. The police don't do anything except stand there looking bored and keeping the traffic tidy."

"Or you might slip on some ice. It's terrible weather."

She looked grave for a moment, as if some important principle were involved. Thoughtfully she said,

"There's not really any risk. And I mustn't start using the baby as an excuse." He knew that now there'd be no stopping her, unless there was an actual blizzard.

He was still uncertain what to do about a job. After New Year he'd have to start looking—but for what? Back to advertising? They had enough in the kitty to jog along for about six weeks, and that wasn't much of a margin.

He was still feeling faintly defiant—the glow of resigning hadn't quite faded—but it simply wasn't prudent to march. The odds that some prospective employer might see him were pretty long. But this is a small world; everything you do connects up in some subtle way with everything else. Sooner or later, all your actions catch up with you.

And he wanted it to be clearly understood by those present that he wasn't 'joining' anything, then or later. Like everyone else who wasn't a complete fool, he had plenty of mental reservations.

Were his reasons personal or political? Did he really care a damn whether or not they rearmed the Germans? Wasn't he in fact turning back to live in the past—the once-valid political past—like a man deliberately entering a dream that for his wife had become a personal necessity?

But the personal was the political. He carried round with him—in fact, personified—the politics of everything that ever happened to him and the life of his times. Life itself was a form of politics, a perpetual, ever-deepening struggle with the loved one, the person chosen from the entire world; and mingled

with it a feeling of responsibility for all the other people, the excluded ones.

He thought wryly, 'I must be suffering from softening of the brain. I'm getting mystical.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Saturday of the demonstration was dry, but so cold that thinking was almost out of the question.

At the top of the High Street, beyond the shops, a cul-de-sac led to a builder's yard. The firstcomers stood there near a battered car, looking by no means as self-conscious as Jimmy expected. They were muffled up, and stamping their feet or beating their hands together.

In their midst was one particularly incongruous figure. A Scotsman with a withered face and steel-rimmed spectacles. He wore a faded kilt and held bagpipes under his elbow. On his hands were mittens darned with the wrong colour.

He held his fingers over the stops to stifle the consequences while he gently blew to inflate the bag. The bagpipes made a muffled sound between a sigh and a groan, and everyone laughed.

"Watch them all look round when he starts blowing," said Sarah, gay as a schoolgirl.

The piper was chatting with a man who wore a greasy trilby and a muffler wound twice round his throat.

"I'm piping all over London." His accent was a strange overlay of cockney upon Glasgow. "This morning one other and now this, and three more

tomorrow. I'm glad of my motor-bike."

Jimmy noticed that dangling from his chest on very old ribbons was almost every medal you could get for being in the wrong place at the right time, from the Mons Star to the lot they gave us last time.

To no one in particular the bagpiper said, "Next month I'll be seventy. No, I never feel the cold, not even on my knees." He chuckled and blew a premonitory hooting sound on the pipes. "They keep you warm, blowing. All over London. I ask you."

More people were arriving.

"Where's Tom? He's got the other banners."

But then a second old motor-car ground its gears and halted, and out got Tom with his arms full of the banners Jimmy had helped to make.

"Form up!" said someone loudly. Then, as if the first phrase had sounded rather too much like an order. "We'd better form up, hadn't we?"

Jimmy's poster said, LOBBY YOUR MP JAN 25TH. No issue of principle was involved in carrying that. He was all for getting after M.P.s and making their lives a misery. That was why an M.P. was paid a salary, wasn't it, to act as everybody's scapegoat?

His place was half-way down the column near the pavement. It was a pretty thin column, say two dozen people carrying banners and three or four outflankers giving away leaflets. But it was well strung out to look as immense as possible.

A big handsome girl of about twenty-three with a fat bundle of leaflets in her left hand walked just in front of Jimmy. She was astonishingly self-possessed.

People on the pavement took leaflets from her readily, and then looked at what they were holding as if surprised at having taken them.

The bagpipes sounded quite cheerful and very loud.

The wide shopping street was so blurred by mid-winter cold that everything seemed grey except the oblong patches of light in the brilliant shop windows. The January sales were about due. There like shouts of distress were the catchy stickers and cut-price slogans. Red silk gleamed on the necks of the lay figures in the ready-made clothing shop. A dummy fire in an ornate hearth glowed away like mad in the window of a hire-purchase furniture shop.

Everything in those windows had been cleverly devised to tempt people to buy. Window bills in vivid ink announced slashing reductions, everything looked improvised and desperate, as if the whole street was expecting the bailiffs.

Jimmy, keeping step with the bagpipes, noted all these details with a professional eye. There it was: something for nothing in Vanity Fair. Here in contrast moving jerkily down the roadway were the slogans which sold nothing but mental unease.

By and large the people were turning their backs on the banners and looking in the windows. All things considered, can you blame them?

Marching along, one caught odd, distorted phrases :
"Lotter Comuniss."

"'ip . . . 'ip . . . 'ip . . ." in a sardonic cockney drawl, but no "'ooray."

One small man in a very large overcoat, who looked surprised at his own temerity, told them to go back to Palestine.

They'd left the shops behind now, and were passing the Odeon. To their left, roller-skating along a wide pavement, were half a dozen small boys, their eyes gleaming at the novelty.

"Give us some leaflets, miss."

The big girl with the fur-lined boots turned around grinning and shared some leaflets among them. Judging by her young, ingenuous face she really couldn't be more than nineteen. Away the small boys scuttled on their roller-skates, looking for passers-by to give their leaflets to. They were a part of the procession now. Jimmy heard the girl laugh spontaneously as he'd not heard anyone laugh for a long time.

How did she manage not to feel self-conscious? The bitter cold gave him an excuse to tuck his chin well down in his collar. But he still wished he'd got a false beard, or some other total disguise.

"Round the green and up the far side of the road," the marshal told them.

Going under the railway bridge there was a sudden intensification of noise, first from the echoed blare of the bagpipes, then from the roller-skates going helter-skelter.

They marched around the green, a small, muddy triangle with a few time-worn laurel bushes. Once presumably it had been a real village green with a maypole and all that. Now it was just a traffic obstruction, and the things you mustn't do on it were closely

defined by law and posted up in small print on a Corporation hoarding.

As they went round the three sides of the triangle and stopped at the traffic light, Jimmy noticed for the first time that they had a policeman walking in front. Looking back he saw that there was a mounted policeman at their rear. They looked amiable enough, and indeed rather futile.

The marshal walked along the column, saying to each pair of marchers, "Start the slogans when we reach the railway bridge."

They were heading back. The novelty was wearing off now. Jimmy had begun to feel warmer, though from holding the pole his hands were extremely numb.

The small boys on roller-skates had crossed the road and were once more waiting for them near the railway arch.

"S'more leaflets, miss."

Off they went ahead, thundering under the parapet.

Slogans. At least they were human voices, competing with the promises of the bright posters.

They started off with NO ARMS FOR THE NAZIS. At first it was a bit difficult to get the words co-ordinated. They were mangled between the impulsive tune of the pipes and the shuffling rhythm of the march, and so became two heavily-accented words, with a gabble in between. "N'ARMS F' TH' NAZIS!" People began taking in breath on the word 'No', and soon to Jimmy's somewhat resentful ears it

began to sound like its opposite, "ARMS F' TH' NAZIS."

He drew the line at bellowing slogans. He closed his mouth tight and told himself that anyway on such a cold day there was no sense in getting laryngitis by shouting himself hoarse.

"N' ARMS F' TH' NAZIS!" It began as a strange, slithering, waltzing rhythm. But the others like himself were trying as they spoke it to superimpose the right words with the right inflection upon the slogan. "No arms for the Nazis." The words were an inner whisper. But then his lips were actually forming them, moving from whisper to speech. And now the marching impetus around him was taking the slogan from his mouth, like the wind blowing words away in a high storm. Against his will, as though the words were being sucked from him in a delirium, he found himself first saying distinctly and then shouting until his own voice was embodied in the universal shout, "NO ARMS FOR THE NAZIS."

People who before had looked at the shops were now turning round.

One man, given a leaflet by the girl in the fur boots, screwed it up, threw it down expressively and trod it underfoot; but his little pantomime was spoiled because none of his neighbours on the pavement noticed. Jimmy felt a quick impulse to drop out of the ranks and go up to that chap—who at least felt strongly about the issues—and make him see the other point of view.

Then a dark-haired girl behind the glass door of a

hat shop signalled dumbly to the girl in fur boots to give her a leaflet, so that she'd know what it was all about. The glass door swung open, and the leaflet was passed through surreptitiously like a message into prison.

Jimmy, taking a random sample to occupy his mind, found that about twice as many read the leaflet as threw it away. And here and there was a man, generally a man but sometimes a woman, who made some gesture of approval.

They had now to march past the main cross-roads and turn left into the cul-de-sac near the builder's yard, for an open-air meeting.

The mounted policeman at the rear of the procession trotted forward. Jimmy at the sound of the loudly cracking hooves felt his muscles go stiff with apprehension. But just then Sarah, two ranks ahead on the outside file, turned to smile at him reassuringly as if knowing by instinct that he was worrying again.

In fact, the mountie was going forward to cope with the traffic at the five-way crossing. He wasn't going to use his baton. It wasn't that sort of demonstration. That only happened when they had special orders.

Then from behind came an urgent sound of hooting. Somebody just for the hell of it was going burp . . . burp . . . burp on the horn of a sports car.

"Halt! That's it! Now keep your ranks!" yelled the marshal.

The head of the procession had been stopped to let traffic pass the cross-roads. The tail, of course, had gone on marching for a few paces before realising, and

was now jammed close, rank on rank, the placards crowded so that nobody could read them. And now, purposely nosing from behind into the people who comprised the procession was a big, low-slung sports car, hooting and edging its way forward, trying to push the marchers into the gutter.

The mounted policeman would never tolerate this because it might lead to trouble. But he'd ridden forward, so the man in the car could enjoy himself thoroughly. With his foot smartly on and off the foot-brake he was disrupting the procession by jumping his powerful car a few inches forward at a time.

Then Jimmy recognised him. Of all people it was John Cox. A small world indeed!

The girl in the fur boots had given her leaflets away so vigorously that she had no more left. Jimmy said to her, "Here, take my banner," and she smiled with innocent pleasure like a child being given a toy.

He went back along the pavement to where Cox sat grinning in his car. He smelt of gin as usual and was resting his elbow nonchalantly on the edge of the open offside window.

"Hello, James," he said.

"Hello, Cox," said Jimmy. Cox turned his head alertly, not having been called Mister.

"I'm warning you, Cox," said Jimmy, in the harshest, most melodramatic voice he could contrive. "You play much more of this game, someone will kick in your mudguards. You're just asking for it."

The smile faded off Cox's face, and one corner of his mouth began to twitch. Before he could find any-

thing clever to retort, Jimmy added, "Unless you want trouble, get going now. Go on!"

Cox's mouth came up and formed into a tight line, with the corners drawn down, yet the muscles of his face were hanging slackly. Jimmy had once seen a similar look on the face of a certain schoolmaster as he began to give the cane.

Hoarsely as he put his car into reverse and swung the bonnet, Cox said, "I'll see you never get another job." He spoke without turning his head, his eyes staring down the long, highly-polished bonnet like a man making an oath to his tribal god.

'Thug,' thought Jimmy. 'Bloody Fascist. Bloody incompetent bully.' He would have liked to drag Cox out of the car and hit him. He was enraged by him.

"Thanks," said the marshal in his car. "But another time, leave that sort of thing to me. You're not supposed to break ranks, you know."

Jimmy felt slightly ashamed, as he'd done once or twice in the war when he'd thoughtlessly broken essential discipline, not bull, but something that might involve the success of an operation.

In the cul-de-sac, the first speaker was a Welshman who started on very long sentences and could never get successfully to the end of them. He was speaking really not in words so much as in strange images, and people were noticing not his language and arguments, which were highly stereotyped, but the glowing look on his face.

The big handsome girl in fur-lined boots, her face cheerful with a sort of calm pleasure, was on the arm

of the man who had acted as marshal to the procession. He was five or six years older—probably an engineer or an electrician. He seemed to be taking her open affection rather for granted. Momentarily, Jimmy found himself bitterly envious of both of them.

He looked around and found Sarah. Her face was pinched with the cold.

A fortnight before, he'd have asked perfunctorily if she were tired and wanted to go home. From annoyance she'd probably have said, "Of course not."

Now he said, "I'm pretty tired—let's get going," and for some reason that expressed the difference in the relationship now between them. She answered placably, "Yes. I've had enough."

In the bus he asked her, "Did you notice who it was, pushing his car into the tail end of the procession?"

"I heard the hooting but didn't look round."

"It was John Cox. When I went to shut him up, do you know what he said?"

"No?"

"He said, 'I'll see you never get another job.'"

"Odious man," said Sarah. Then, after a thoughtful few moments, "How much power has he got? Can he do it?"

"I shouldn't think so. He's just one director of a fairly unimportant firm."

"Have they got a black list?"

A black list? What did she think this was—America?

"Let's not be morbid about it, dear."

A black list? Utter nonsense. This particular black-

list dossier, do-they-know-my-secret-thoughts fear was just another of the obsessive suburban nightmares, though one of which the authorities made deliberate use with the confidential reports on bank clerks and Civil Servants. Advertising wasn't respectable enough yet to start using the dossier and black list. Or was it?

"I know how his mind works," said Jimmy at last. "When he has to, he can think quickly. He was saying the one thing he thought might frighten me."

"We'll soon have to start making plans about your new job."

"Yes."

"Christmas is hardly a time for that particular problem. But it's still there, waiting for us."

"I know."

"You don't sound very hopeful."

"I wish they'd taught me to do something useful. Say I'd learned to be an electrician or an engineer."

"Will you try the other agencies? Or does the thought of more advertising make you sick?"

"Let me go around town for a couple of days and talk to people. I've still got a few friends, I hope."

He spent four or five days, ringing people up and fixing to have a drink with them. To begin with he had plenty of bounce; he could laugh about what had happened and talk of the future confidently. But around the seventh, eighth and ninth interviews, when he hadn't turned up so much as a whisper of a job, he began to feel a bit depressed. Business was

big and he was small; and he couldn't even find a crack to crawl into.

At the start he'd been able to keep a common-sense grip on the situation. But as time went by, various fantasies began to spring up in his mind. Was there really a black list? He could for instance sell the house, pay off the building society, cash in his insurance, raise money right and left and emigrate with Sarah to New Zealand. Out there they might value his specialised training. Or they might buy a cottage somewhere like Devon or Shropshire, and he could get an honest, straightforward job working on the land.

One afternoon he felt so depressed that instead of going into the Westminster Reference Library to look up some addresses he went to the pictures instead.

It left him on edge, and feeling he was giving in. When he arrived home in the dark, after fighting through the rush hour, he was ready for a quarrel, and a month before, there would have been one. But now that he couldn't deliver his monthly cheque, he couldn't very well use Sarah as a chopping block for his bad temper, either.

She was in the front room, knitting in baby wool with her mouth pursed up intently. Generally she started knitting with determination, because she thought she ought, and then got in a mess with the complications of the pattern and gave the job to her mother to finish.

"There's a letter come for you." She pointed to the mantelpiece. It was in a white foolscap envelope, with

a typed address, and might have been from a lawyer, or a high-class bookmaker soliciting new business.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I had any luck?" He tried hard to keep the peevishness out of his voice. She could see by his face that he hadn't, but obediently she parroted, "Had any luck?"

"No—blast it."

She dug the knitting needles into the ball of fluffy wool and dropped the lot on the floor, like someone bored with a game of skill.

"Kiss," she said, holding out her arms. There was a take-it-or-leave-it tone about the offer; but the slightly pathetic extended arms argued that she really wanted a kiss. He kissed her, and it was silly that it should be so, but he felt better.

"Why not open your letter?" She handed it to him.

Familiar IAS notepaper. He looked at the signature—it was Lorimer's bold, black squiggle, jumping out of the past into the here and now.

My dear James . . .

Not for the first time, Jimmy James had an odd feeling about his surname. As if when someone used it, you could never tell how intimate he really wanted to be.

He forced his eyes to take in word by word the sense of the two paragraphs:

A rumour has just reached me that there may be a job at LPU of about your size and weight.

Please do not hesitate to use my name as a

reference if you think it might help. Sincerely yours . . .

LPU—London Publicity Union—was one of the bigger agencies, and very reputable.

"Isn't that good of him?" said Sarah.

Jimmy stood there incredulous. Why had Lorimer done it?

Had Cox told of seeing him march down the road with a banner? Did Lorimer think, in some crude way, it was better to help him get a job than have him turn desperately Communist?

Maybe Lorimer privately was against arming the Germans, and this was his way of showing it. Maybe he'd done it to spite John Cox, whom he intensely disliked. Cox was a bully and a boaster, but Lorimer dominated in more subtle ways.

Indeed the very offer of this job might be one of his subtle ways of dominating. It blurred all the sharp whites and blacks into greys. It mingled his clear new hatred with incompatible sentiments like obligation and gratitude.

But even though the offer might be a way of buying his gratitude, he still needed a job. And this sounded a good one.

"I'd be a fool to turn it down," he said, experimentally.

"You don't have to go back to the agency business."

"I shall cope better next time."

"Don't you think you ought to write to Mr. Lorimer and thank him?"

His own mother's phrase exactly. When you got a present, you wrote and gave thanks for it. And if you couldn't identify the giver, you gave thanks to God.

"He doesn't want a letter, I'm sure. He did it for some good reason of his own. Maybe he feels ashamed."

In England except when times are hard they don't skin you alive. And if they drive you into a nervous breakdown, they send you a cheque from the Benevolent Fund, to buy you the best of medical care. The motto all the while the boom lasted was not love your enemy, nor even hate your enemy, but if possible geld your enemy.

"He won't expect a letter," said Jimmy James, "but remind me to send him a card next Christmas."

'Peace on earth,' he was thinking. 'Goodwill to all men.'

Tomorrow he would put on his best shirt and his grey silk tie, and go and talk his way into another job in another agency.